

REPORT TO G.C. FEBRUARY 1998

Much has happened since the last G.C. and there is much to talk about. All in all I think the new Government is doing an excellent job, although since Christmas we have been sailing through choppy waters. As the Prime Minister has said, we are in a difficult phase, where pledges have been paraded but the results have not yet had time to show through.

In many cases it will take a number of years for the full effects of Labour's new policies to materialise, but by July of this year we should have a better idea of where the new resources are going to be allocated. As everyone knows, the Government embarked on a comprehensive spending review in which all Government Departments were asked to look critically at every item of spending to see where priorities could be changed and cash freed up for use in our priority areas. The Chancellor has also published a mark two Domesday Book - The National Assets Register - which sets out everything that the State owns. Items range from car parks in Stevenage to NHS hospitals and MoD land. Many of these assets are no longer needed and can be sold.

The Prime Minister talks about the "big picture" but there are some brush strokes which have yet to be applied. We still do not know where the welfare reform agenda is taking us and we await the publication of the Social Security Green Paper which Frank Field is working on. Social Security fact files have been published, but these have been of limited use, as they do not give reasons or explanations why certain benefits may have low take-up and others where the cost appears to have spiralled out of control.

There are one or two other areas where the Government is coming under some pressure and these include the debate over age discrimination (where we no longer intend to legislate) Trade Union recognition (still under discussion) and access to land (where the consultation document which is to be published will include the option of voluntary access agreements as well as a statutory right to roam).

While there are always going to be difficulties facing the Government, we should never underestimate the terrible legacy the Tories left us. I recall the drama of a fortnight ago when John Prescott came to the Commons at 10pm to say that the private sector promoters (who include Virgin) could not raise the money to proceed with the Channel Tunnel Rail Link. You can imagine how I felt, given that I had spent about 9 months on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Select Committee agreeing the route, only for this to happen! I told the House that it was one of the great scandals that so much money had been gifted to the private sector and they still could not make the sums add up. Apart from land and property, the Government was contracted to hand over £1.8 billion to the private sector company for a 68 mile stretch of track. To put this into perspective, the Tories sold the entire British Rail network for £2 billion.

Yesterday, we had the Public Health Green Paper that reminded us that our health here in East Lancashire is amongst the poorest in the country. We have a very high incidence of stroke and heart disease and our children's dental health is the worst in England. The Green Paper had nothing to say about fluoridation, which is a tremendously controversial subject here in the North West.

Locally, I have been getting a blizzard of letters from Tony Greaves on every subject under the sun. So we must be getting very close to a local election! The future of Hartley Hospital and the by-pass feature regularly. Looking to the future, I shall be visiting Smith & Nephew, Brierfield Mills on Monday for the official installation of new state of the art weaving machinery.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
6.2.98

Report to Pendle GC: 7 November 1997

Back at Westminster we have hit some turbulence! First the ructions over tuition fees, then lone parent benefit. Then the announcement that no Government time would be made available for the fox hunting bill. Then the wind chill factor swept in! Then the much trumpeted tobacco advertising ban (except for Formula 1). Then the suspension of the four Labour MEPs. All in all, quite a basket of issues.

However, on the big issue (the single currency) Gordon Brown got it absolutely right. His side kick Charlie Whelan starred in a very ill judged fly-on-the-wall documentary following Gordon Brown through the General Election campaign and into office. It went down like a lead balloon with journalists and other politicians. The Chancellor promised to calm the markets with a statement to the Commons on the first day back and it was spot on. He said essentially that there was no going in to the Euro unless it was incontestably in Britain's economic interests. Everyone in the PLP could live with that. The final decision will, of course, be taken by the British people in a referendum.

What did Hague do? He has ruled out joining - not on principle - but for two Parliaments. He showed very poor judgement. It triggered the resignation from the Conservative Party of my predecessor John Lee who represented Pendle in Parliament for 13 years. He said the policy was "absurd and unreasonable" and was "cobbled together by a group of young zealots and old dinosaurs". Then it was the turn of David Curry to resign from the Opposition front bench saying William Hague risked leaving the Tories *"marooned by events, marginalised in debate and alienated from sections of the electorate"*. The Conservatives really are in danger of splitting into two parties and that would leave them out of power for a generation.

Neil Hamilton

To make things even more difficult for them, there is the constant spectre of Neil Hamilton, rising from the grave, refusing to go away. He is a potent reminder of the sleaze of the Tory years. He is a liar and a cheat and one of the most arrogant people alive. Yet, even so, I find it difficult not to feel sorry for him.

Here in the Labour Party we have learned from the past. We sink or swim together. But that imposes a responsibility on the leadership to pay more than lip service to opinion within the Party. Our new policy making structures are new and barely

tested but if we are to cope with the inevitable difficulties of Government then CLPs, the PLP and the wider Party must have an input on policy.

Three Ministers

I have arranged for a number of Ministers to come to Pendle over the next month. On 19th November, Hilary Armstrong, the Housing Minister, will be with us in the afternoon. The Sports Minister, Tony Banks, will be the guest of honour at the prize giving at Edge End at the end of the month. In early December, the President of the Board of Trade, will be officially opening the new Netherfield Road buildings which will house the Consortium of Lancashire Aerospace and other organisations.

Locally, the Stagecoach saga rolls on. I have had a stream of letters setting out in considerable detail the failings of Stagecoach and its fantasy bus timetable. The company has an apologist in Cllr Tony Greaves who, it seems, never misses an opportunity to say how good they are! I am passing on all the complaints to the company which has, until now, studiously ignored those from passengers. The Government is pledged to re regulate the buses and introduce legislation next year. So, watch this space.

I also notice the local LibDems are up in arms over tuition fees. I recall some of them such as John David (on the Nelson & Colne College board) being uncharacteristically quiet this time last year when the College was threatening to make 47 people redundant.

On cold weather payments, it is as well to remember that the Government has already taken action to help people keep warm this winter. Annual fuel bills will be cut by £60m as a result of cutting VAT on fuel to 5%. £60m is the equivalent of three CWP to everyone who is entitled to them. Last year the average number of CWPs was two. We are also providing Home Energy Efficiency grants to an estimated 400,000 vulnerable households. Harriet Harman says introducing a wind chill factor would increase complexity. Unfortunately, we didn't say that in opposition.

The financial juggling that we are witnessing in the Government arises directly from our commitment to stick to the Conservative spending plans for the first two years. It is now pretty obvious these were impossibly tight. Ministers are undertaking a Comprehensive Spending Review to see which areas of expenditure can be cut back, freeing up resources for use elsewhere. We wait to see what emerges.

Gordon Prentice MP

Friday, 7 November 1997

REPORT TO G.C. AUGUST 1997

I have had a very interesting week. As you all know I have had two young people working for me in the office and they have both done a splendid job in helping out. Richard Blakey is doing some research for me on some controversial issues such as Dearing, which we will be addressing when Parliament returns after the Recess. I have had a number of letters from local people expressing deep concern about the proposal to charge students tuition fees and clearly this is something that needs full discussion. Iasma has also been looking at some issues for me, including the Pendle Partnership Youth Focus Bid which has, I think, to be submitted in outline by the end of next month. A final decision will be taken by the Government in March of next year.

LITERACY

This week I have been out and about visiting various schools and other organisations. I had a great time at Walter Street CP School, where the children are busily preparing a page for next Friday's edition of the Nelson Leader! They interviewed me about life as an MP so I know I shall be featuring (I can't always say that about the Leader). Another group of children interviewed me for Radio Lancashire and that went out yesterday. This drive for literacy is immensely important and is one of the elements in the new consultation paper "Excellence in Schools" which was published by the Government at the end of July. It is out for consultation until 7 October and I have written to all Secondary & Primary School Heads asking for sight of their submission should they be minded to make one.

We also visited Country Holidays in Earby which now employs about 300 people and this number will be rising to 400 over the next year. Yesterday I was at Loamy Wood and later at the AGM of the Consortium of Lancashire Aerospace (CLA) where I welcomed all the delegates and said a few words. The energetic Dennis Mendoras was on to me as soon as the results were declared in the General Election, lobbying and promoting the CLA as ever. I have arranged for Margaret Beckett to come up later this year to visit.

Apart from that, I have been attending various celebrations associated with the Independence of Pakistan 50 years ago and very enjoyable they have been. I have another dinner coming up on Sunday.

TRANSPORT

On national politics I am keeping myself busy. The Department of the Environment, Transport & Regions published the Roads Review consultation in July and last week, John Prescott and Gavin Strang launched the consultation document on the Integrated Transport Strategy. I have circulated copies of both documents to constituents who have been in touch with me over the months about transport issues, including the Colne-Foulridge bypass. Copies are also going to Councillors. We are also very busy in the office sending out personalised press releases to Labour MPs on transport issues.

The Election is now slipping from view and we are all now looking to the future where normal politics will be resumed. We have the Party Conference at the end of next month and the debate on the Partnership in Power document. When Parliament returns we shall have a very heavy legislative work load and lots to keep us busy.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
29.8.97.

Report to GC: 29 November 1996

The past month has been very eventful. The clock is now ticking down fast towards the General Election and the mood at Westminster is feverish. This week's Budget was just what we expected - another attempt to con the voters into believing that Conservatives can manage the economy competently.

In fact, the distribution of wealth now is more unequal than ever. 8% of the population own 50% of the nation's wealth. The other 92% own the other half! The national debt has doubled since John Major entered Downing Street. We are now spending more than £24 billion a year just to service it. Compare this to the £14 billion we spend on education and employment or the £6.8 billion on law and order. That puts it all into perspective. We also had the RSG settlement which pegs Pendle to a standstill budget. Lancashire is allowed a tiny 2.2% increase.

Moving on from the Budget, next week we shall be debating the Firearms (Amendment) Bill which returns to the floor of the Commons. I am on the Committee considering the Bill and I have been deluged by letters from all over the country. I shall be pressing for tighter controls over airguns and replicas when we consider the Bill again on Wednesday.

The single currency has again flared up as an issue with the Conservatives at each other's throats. Labour clarified its policy, promising a referendum before any irrevocable decisions are made. Quite right too.

Locally, the Colne/Foulridge Bypass has hit the headlines again as has the proposed new development in Colne. These are major planning issues which provoke strong public reactions. I have already had people to see me who bought houses in Foulridge, completely oblivious to the fact that a by pass was on the cards. I shall be spending a lot of time listening to people's concerns. The by pass in particular is a difficult issue for many of us.

Lots more to say but I've run out of time.

Gordon Prentice MP
Friday 29 November 1996

REPORT TO G.C. 27 SEPTEMBER 1996

The Conference season is now under way and I am looking forward to going to Blackpool next week. This week's Liberal Conference has been rather overshadowed by external events (notably the Police IRA swoop on Monday) and it has made little impact. Save, that is, for one person - our very own Tony Greaves who was never off the box. When he was not slagging off the Labour Party he was criticising his own Party leadership. In Thursday's Guardian Sketch, Simon Hoggart wrote of a fringe meeting addressed by Tony Greaves: "a councillor from Pendle, Lancs., who has been coming to Liberal Conferences since around the time of Gladstone. Mr. Greaves is a world class hater. If there was a transfer market for haters, he would be Alan Shearer. He has hated me for at least twenty years, though I can't think why, since it wasn't me who wrote that - with his bald scalp and bushy beard - Mr. Greaves looks as if his head has been put on upside down."

This is perfectly true. I have in my files a cutting from Simon Hoggart's Sketch from Thursday 22 September 1994 when he wrote: "Early yesterday morning, I found myself sitting next to traditional aggressive, old style Liberal Councillor, Tony Greaves, who is both bearded and bald, causing my colleague, Derek Brown to write many years ago that he looks as if his head has been put on upside down. Mr. Greaves has been a sparring partner of mine for some time. He glowered at me and remarked 'my decades of hatred for you was slightly mitigated by your article in this morning's paper' I was so touched by this effusive flattery I almost wept."

Prompted by all the publicity about Tony Greaves I've been looking through my press cuttings and it is true to say that Tony Greaves' lexicon is peppered with words such as "hate" and "lying". He is always angrily demanding "apologies". I will be a happy man indeed if the Liberal Democrats select Tony Greaves as their prospective Parliamentary candidate. I am, quite frankly, astonished that so late in the day they have yet to choose their standard bearer. The Conservative Candidate, John Midgeley, does pop up from time to time, but he has made very little impact. He hasn't even challenged me to a public debate! This was a ruse I tried on John Lee on many occasions before my election.

BEST BEHAVIOUR

Next week's Conference will be important for us and we shall all be on our best behaviour. In a number of policy areas, we have yet to get the definition that is required and I am hopeful that over the next few months we will be covered on all the main areas of policy.

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Locally, I have been keeping myself busy with visits to the local police, local farms and so on. I also seem to have been following the Mayor about, sneaking into his photographs! On Friday of Conference week I shall be saying a few words at the East Lancashire Chamber of Commerce meeting in Accrington and in the following week there is the ELTEC Annual Meeting, a visit to British Waterways to discuss their plans for canal restoration and a discussion with local members of the Licensed Victuallers Association about the threat to our domestic breweries and pubs from cheap imported beers. And of course, on Friday of that week, we have Clare Short coming to give the Silverman Lecture.

Looking further into October, I am setting up a meeting down at Westminster with our Shadow Defence Secretary, David Clark, and MPs from our DTI team with people from the Consortium of Lancashire Aerospace. I am also setting up a dinner with local industrialists at Westminster to discuss the Party's plans for engineering and manufacturing.

GENERAL ELECTION

After the Party Conference all eyes will focus on the General Election and there is much to be done. The Conservative vote - as I have said on many occasions - is strong and resilient and they have a keen new Agent who will be beavering away in the background doing his best to shore up the Conservative vote. For our part, we need to build up our Election war chest so that we can spend up to the maximum allowed. Clearly, it would be dreadful if we were to run short of cash half way through the campaign. In this connection, I want to thank everyone who has contributed to the Party's coffers through the 200 Club and by supporting Party functions. There was a very successful fund raising dinner last weekend at Brierfield and all credit must go to Roger and Azhar and the others who organised everything. I am told the event raised about £600 - magnificent.

Apart from cash, we do, of course, need volunteers and we have a group of regulars who are really doing the business at Carr Road. However, we still need people to do the telephone canvassing. If you know anyone who is prepared to help in any way then do get in touch with the office at Carr Road or with my Agent, Bob.

Every election is a difficult one and we must take nothing for granted. The fact that Labour won in 1992 must not deceive us into believing that the result here is a foregone conclusion next time. An old Labour supporter I was speaking to recently said that Labour only wins in Pendle "when a gale's blowing". I want to make sure we win in 1997 even if there is just a moderate breeze.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
27.9.96.

REPORT TO G.C. 26 JULY 1996

This week it is end of term, after a particularly stormy and politically exciting month. An enormous amount has been happening and I hardly know where to begin.

When the Commons returns in early October we shall all be focusing exclusively on the General Election. The entire Party will be on red alert and we will need to step up our campaigning efforts. Our own Campaign Committee here in Pendle is up and running and Martin is pulling everything together. I hope we will be able to do a great deal of telephone canvassing over the summer to identify the Labour vote, so that when the balloon goes up we know where our votes are.

Over the Summer it is very much business as usual for me. I will be visiting local factories, schools and so on and I have some young people coming into the office to see how I spend my time and, for their part, to get some work experience. This will be the fourth year I have done this and I get a lot out of it.

The Road to the Manifesto has now been published with Labour's "first pledges" to the electorate and this gives us something hard to bite on. I shall be speaking to our next door neighbours in the Ribble Valley CLP on the document and the Road to the Manifesto process in early September. Clearly the document will be endorsed by the full membership and by Conference in October, but there will be other policy pledges to follow. What is in the Road to the Manifesto sets out a Labour Government's approach (on borrowing, inflation and so on) but I expect there will be more specific pledges unfolding as we approach the election. Gordon Brown has made it clear that he will not reveal our tax policy until after the November Budget. We are, therefore, in a curious position of the Liberal Democrats having committed themselves to a 50p top rate, while we have not moved beyond 40p.

Things are certainly looking good for us. The Conservative Party is riven with splits and the resignation of David Heathcote-Amory over the single currency, perhaps is a sign of things to come. There are, of course, differences of view on this key issue within the Labour Party and at some stage we too will have to address the issue. After all, under the terms of the opt out negotiated by John Major on whether Britain should join a single currency, a decision must be made in 1997 - next year. The Leader has promised closer consultation with the PLP on the key policy questions and it is in all our interests for the leadership, the PLP and the wider Party to work closely together in the run up to the General Election. Clearly this is the overriding imperative.

SHADOW CABINET ELECTIONS

The Shadow Cabinet Elections have come and gone, leaving barely a ripple on the surface of the water. As expected, Harriet Harman did not poll well, but she retained her place after the Leader made it clear that those who were knocking on the Shadow Cabinet door last year should not stand this time round. It was a curious election indeed. Yesterday, the news was of Clare Short's move to Overseas Development and the promotion of Andrew Smith into the Shadow Cabinet when he was one of the many very competent front benchers who had followed the line and chosen not to stand. I am happy enough with the line up but I do not apologise for one moment for insisting that the Shadow Cabinet election should take place.

I backed a move by Paul Flynn a couple of months ago to bring forward the elections to July from the usual date in November, but that motion was defeated on the recommendation of the Leadership. When it became clear that the Leader's preference was to cancel the elections, a very large number of MPs protested and they went ahead. Everything else is history. Perhaps I should add one point. With the changing and very marked shift in the balance of power and influence within the Party at Westminster, I am beginning to see a need for a Labour equivalent of the Tory 1922 Committee which represents back bench opinion to the Leadership. I now think something along these lines is pretty well inevitable.

The other issue that has caught the headlines is, of course, MPs pay. As the Party will know, I voted against the increase and will not be taking the money.

The other thing that has excited us all at Westminster has been the announcement - or rather the non-announcement until yesterday - of the Defence Contracts which are of such importance here in the North West. Hundreds of jobs are riding on these contracts and here in Pendle, Cleveland-Guest has a stake in the Nimrod order. Earlier this month, I asked Treasury Minister, Angela Knight what percentage of the civilian population was employed in defence related manufacturing in each year since 1979. In that year it stood at 0.9%. Now (93/94) it is down to 0.5%

CASHFORINFLUENCE

Still on the subject of Defence, everyone has been stunned by the brazenness of both Mr. Beckwith and the Prime Minister over the cash for influence affair. Here we have a multi-millionaire Tory supporter and member of the Premier Club (membership costs £100,000) bidding for the Ministry of Defence married quarters estate which is to be sold off to the private sector and then rented back. Mr. Beckwith has also expressed an interest in the sale of the nation's Social Security offices and yet the Prime Minister says that membership of the Premier Club - which gives access to him - does not confer any benefits. If that is so, he should strike Beckwith off the list of bidders for both contracts. Every time we hear of new sleazy revelations about the Conservatives I tell myself that they have hit the bottom. The astonishing fact is there is always something sleazier coming along behind.

Turning to more local matters, I spent a very interesting hour and a half with the Lancashire Chief Fire Officer going through in detail his recommendations for the Fire Service Review. As everyone knows, the Liberals every year build this up into a big story and I am convinced, once and for all, the debate should be informed by the facts. I have written to the Fire Authority as part of its consultation and I have copied my letter to the local press.

Tomorrow I am (unusually) viewing the Beating of the Retreat at Fulwood Barracks, Preston and on Sunday I shall be at another Kashmir meeting here in Pendle.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
26.7.96.

G.C. REPORT : 24 MAY 1996

Unfortunately, Peter Kilfoyle is unable to be with us tonight to talk about the Party's education policies. But our neighbour, Hyndburn MP, Greg Pope has stepped into the breach at short notice. It was good of Greg to give up his Friday night. Greg is a member of the Education Select Committee and takes a close interest in education matters and is well placed to tell us about current thinking in the education team.

Indeed, the Party has just published a new consultation document on Lifelong Learning and if anyone wants one, then perhaps they could let the office know and I will do my best to get extra copies. This paper is one of a number that are now being published as part of the "road to the manifesto" process. It is an attempt by the Leadership to engage the wider Party so that when the manifesto comes to be written there will be a real consensus as to what it should contain. As always, the difficulty is not in those areas where we all agree, but rather in areas where we don't! In this regard we have seen the publication of a paper by Gordon Brown on "The Treasury's Mission under Labour" which provoked John Prescott into saying that he wasn't going to stand for the creation of a super treasury smothering initiatives from other departments. The Shadow Chancellor also generated an enormous row over his Child Benefit proposals - not only for what he said - but because he didn't consult people before hand - not even all the relevant Front Benchers. Clearly, this is no way to go about things and I think there is a greater consciousness on the part of the Leadership of the need to keep everyone on side and on board.

We also had speculation about the Shadow Cabinet Elections and whether they would be abandoned. At the last PLP meeting there was a suggestion from the floor that these elections would prove to be too divisive. From my own personal view it would cause more trouble within the Party were they to be abandoned. I told the PLP that the power of the PLP is not great and is diminishing but that MPs views have a right to be aired and listened to and the elections should go ahead.

Moving away from internal Labour Party politics, we have all been preoccupied with the BSE crisis and I have been down to Woodhead Bros. in Colne a number of times now. The Government is desperately trying to turn things round, but it cannot escape its culpability for allowing this situation to arise in the first place. When the BSE agent was first identified, the Government should have offered farmers 100% compensation for each animal destroyed. Instead, they offered 50% of the value of the beast and it is no wonder that animals ended up in human food. I have just been appointed to the Agriculture Select Committee and I obviously will be working closely on these matters over coming months.

Elsewhere at Westminster we have had the confirmation by the District Auditor of the corruption in the City of Westminster by Shirley Porter and her colleagues. Westminster Council was held out to be a flagship by the Tories and we now know for certain that there were attempts to gerrymander the results of the 1990 council elections by moving families out of homes in target wards and keeping those houses empty - despite growing numbers on the

waiting list. The Auditor has calculated the loss to the Council is £31 million, which may just put pressure on Lady Porter's bank account.

Still on scandals, there has been nothing in living memory to touch rail privatisation, where the entire railway network of 10,000 miles, with 2500 stations and 90 maintenance depots, has been sold off for a song. The Government raised about £1.9 billion, which is less than the annual public subsidy, which the Government will give the new private train operators. The Government has already promised £1.4 billion to Richard Branson's London & Continental Company to build and operate the 68 mile long channel tunnel rail link. There is also the possibility that the Government may go ahead with Crossrail in London which will cost £2 billion - and it is only 6 miles long and will be in tunnel under the Capital. It makes you think.

We have also been dealing with the Housing Grants Bill which will scrap mandatory improvement grants. This Bill will have a big impact on areas like Pendle where there is so much poor housing which is in desperate need of renovation.

Finally, its back to elections and we now face the prospect of a further two by-elections in Coates and Craven. I think we have an excellent chance of taking the seats if we work hard. The May Local Elections seem very far away now, but, as we all know, although we didn't win control of the council we took by far and away the largest percentage of votes cast. In Colne in particular, we did very well and my thanks go to everyone involved.

We are now turning into the home straight and the General Election must, by law, be held by 22 May 1997. Most pundits believe that an election next year is more probable, but what with the cost of the BSE crisis and other economic bad news, there is no guarantee that a November budget will be able to cut taxes sufficiently in the run up to a 1997 election. These leaves open the possibility of a General Election this year, held on the back of the beef crisis with John Major wrapping himself in the Union Jack. His Commons majority may disappear at any time. He is dependent not just on keeping the grim reaper at bay, but on the fickle Ulster Unionists who could withdraw their support. We must be ready for an early election. Pendle as a constituency needs to be worked constantly and over time. If we do this, I am convinced we can turn it into a safe Labour seat. But we have got to work at it, we won't get a second chance.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
24.5.96.

REPORT TO G.C. MARCH 1996

I am writing this on Wednesday morning (27 March) just before I leave for Brussels to discuss the liberalisation of telecommunications in the European Union. Unlike Britain, most of the countries in the European Union have telecommunications industries which are very resistant to competition and the European Union wants to open things up to allow companies like BT access to telecommunications markets across Europe. I shall be away until Friday and I may be a bit late for the G.C.

On Thursday there is, of course, the Marsden by-election and I am confident we will retain the seat. We have an excellent candidate in Gary and a victory here will provide a good spring board for the local elections in May. We are, of course, losing some very experienced councillors and, like everyone else, I am sorry to see them go. And I would like to thank them here for the tremendous contribution they have all made to the Labour Group over the years. It is, of course, natural that there should be a turnover and I see press reports that Heather Greaves will be standing down. As will Val Whipp and Ann Moulton. The new Council will have a lot of new faces.

WESTMINSTER

Here at Westminster everything has been completely dominated by the BSE crisis. As it happens, back in December, during the last scare (it was a "scare" then) I was assured that British beef was safe and there was nothing to worry about. Now we have had the horrors of the new cases in young people of CJD and clearly action has to be taken to restore public confidence. My own view is that ~~slaughtering~~ all cattle that came in contact with infected feed should be destroyed. This will, of course, cost billions and will probably dash all hopes of a tax cut before the General Election. I think it will also strip from the Government any shreds of credibility it still has. I think it would be unwise to underestimate the impact this BSE issue has had on people and how they view the Government.

Elsewhere, we have the Inter-Governmental Conference in Turin coming up on Friday 29 March and there are big questions about the future of Europe still to be resolved. The G.C. knows my views on the single currency and I won't repeat them here. The heart of the issue is whether we want the European Union to evolve into a federal super state or whether we want to see a Europe of Nation states co-operating and working closely in the commercial sphere and in other spheres (for example, environment) where it makes sense. The issues cut across traditional Party divides, although the focus to date has been on divisions in the Conservative Party. The full spectrum of views are in the Labour Party too, but these occupy the "invisible" spectrum.

At Westminster we had the Family Law Bill arrive at the Commons from the Lords. Other than that, the legislative programme is fairly light. The Government planned it that way to be able to clear the books if it was felt there was a window of opportunity and they could benefit from a snap General Election. There is, of course, the Staffordshire by-election coming up on 11 April and this will be a tough nut to crack. The Conservatives are doing a tremendous amount of telephone canvassing and they are desperately anxious to hold the seat.

Finally, I will be introducing a Ten Minute Rule Bill on May Day, to give local authorities the power to provide goods and services to other organisations and individuals. After years in which councils had to struggle with constraints on their trading activities, I would like to see the position reversed and powers given to them to sell their services - if they can - into the open market.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
29.3.96.

Report to Pendle GC. Friday 26 January 1996

This has been a truly awful week. The Harriet Harman business has cast a thick pall of gloom over the PLP. When news first broke, the feeling of anger and the sense of being let down was palpable. The revelations have done tremendous harm to the Party and we must hope the charge of hypocrisy will not stick. If it does, there will be major consequences.

On the day the PLP discussed the controversy, I received a faxed copy of a press release put out by the Conservative Parliamentary candidate here in Pendle. I have told the press (and I am not going to return to the issue) that the question of whether she goes or stays must be a matter for Harriet. She has heard the arguments. She knows how people feel. Politically, I think she is dead in the water and resignation would be better for her in the long run.

Nursery Vouchers. The furore over Harriet Harman has dominated everything this week - but life goes on elsewhere. On Monday of this week we had the second reading debate on the nursery vouchers scheme. Parents of four year olds are to be issued with a £1,100 voucher to redeem for a part-time nursery place or a full-time reception class place in a primary school or as much provision in the private or voluntary sectors as the £1,100 will purchase. The vouchers will be issued and redeemed by a private company. Of the £730 million pledged to the scheme, "about" £548 million is to be clawed back from local authority spending on under-fives' services; £185 million of "new money" will be channelled through the voucher company - £20 million of which will be spent on administration and inspection. Gillian Shephard has gone on the record against vouchers. In 1994 she told the Independent: *"I must say I am very conscious of the unwieldy nature of vouchers. You don't want the machinery to overshadow the policy."*

This week also marked the start of the Finance Bill in Committee. This puts the Budget into law. I am on the Bill and it will probably take up a good deal of my time over the next two months.

The Bus sell-off. Here in Pendle, things are coming to the boil over the bus sell-off proposal and Susan will be bringing everyone up to date. At Westminster, I have tabled an Early Day Motion (with Peter as co-signatory) calling for a reference to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission if the sale to Stagecoach goes through. On the publicity front, a march and rally are to take place on Saturday and I believe Tim has been responsible for organising this. I hope we get a good turnout. I know that Peter Pike has advice surgeries and got the details too late to rearrange his diary. Unfortunately, he won't be able to get along.

Sticking with the Liberals for the moment (and if we are to believe the press) a motion is to be put to the full councils meeting next week which criticises me for publicising their misdeeds at Westminster! What on earth do they expect me to do faced with the duplicity and mendacity of the crew in

charge at the Town Hall! Helen has put together a briefing for the Labour Group and I hope it will be helpful on the night.

Housing Bill. Next week is another busy week at Westminster. On Monday, the new Housing Bill is being introduced. Since the Tories got in, the number of homeless people has doubled. At the same time the number of council houses being built has plummeted. For every council house being built today, the last Labour Government was building 41. In the entire North West region only 3 (three) new council houses were started in 1994! In the North West in 1979 there were 7,130 homeless people. That was far too many then but the figure now is 18,350. Homeowners did not escape unscathed. From 1990-94, 79,345 mortgage repossession actions were taken in the North West. A chilling statistic of mortgage misery for so many families.

On Tuesday, there is a debate on the deficiencies of the privatised water companies and another on the Police Grant (relevant when police station cutbacks are in the air). On Wednesday, the Revenue Support Grant report for England is up for debate.

Low pay. In the forthcoming election, low pay and the minimum wage will figure prominently. I have winkled these statistics out of the DTI which shows conclusively how much worse off we are in the UK when compared with other European countries with a minimum wage. It's staggering.

Country	National minimum hourly wage (stg)	Number of full-time hourly wage rates (millions)	workers in GB
Belgium	5.46	6.19	
France	4.84	4.78	
Greece	1.82	0.27	
Luxembourg	5.51	6.31	
Netherlands	5.04	5.24	
Portugal	1.30	0.15	
Spain	2.00	0.29	

Elsewhere, I shall be appearing (no doubt very briefly!) in tomorrow night's Scrutiny programme on BBC 2 at 7.30pm which is looking at the work of the Deregulation Select Committee.

The General Election is coming up fast. I shall say a few words about it.

Gordon Prentice MP. 26 January 1996

REPORT TO G.C. 24 NOVEMBER 1995

I am writing this on Friday morning before dashing off to Telford for a conference on "Cities for the Future", organised by the Party's Shadow Minister for Planning & Regeneration, Keith Vaz. I shall be chairing a round table syndicate in which one of the speakers will be Burnley's Kath Reade. It follows I may be a bit late in getting back for the G.C.

Yesterday the Ballot for Private Members Bills was drawn and, tragically, I came nowhere near the top, so my Access to Land Bill goes back in the filing cabinet. It will be dusted down next year. Tory MP, John Butterfill, wants to bring in a Bill to extend Summer Time into the winter months. I am not entirely sure how successful he will be, as there is very strong opposition to any change from Scottish MPs. If there were a change, the Highlands would still be in darkness well after 10am.

Parliament is back in full swing and we have had the Queen's Speech debates. It is a very thin menu and there is not a lot to get your teeth into. However, there are a number of measures that will prove to be very controversial and which, in the words of the Tory Party Chairman Brian Mawhinney, are designed to "smoke out" Labour. It is a tactic which I think has badly misfired. I am thinking about the new Asylum & Immigration Bill and the refusal of the Conservatives to submit it to a special Standing Committee which could take evidence in public from people and organisations, before considering the detail of the Bill itself. We have more legislation planned on GM schools and nursery vouchers will be introduced. The latter is, of course, a gigantic con trick, because no new nursery places will be created, but there will be a blizzard of vouchers instead. We will also have the Bill to bring in Digital TV and so forth.

Next Tuesday we have the Budget and it remains to be seen what the Tories will do on tax. I suspect it will help them in some measure, but people are now very cynical about tax cuts which are purely designed to save the Tory's bacon.

For our part, Gordon Brown has promised (when resources allow!) a starting tax rate of 10p -which I fully support - but has said little about the other end of the scale. We are still stuck with a 40p top rate and I firmly believe we need more bands, just like the council tax. We need to put the tax burden on the shoulders of those most able to bear it. What we cannot and must not do is to give people on low and middle incomes the impression that we are going to savagely increase their taxes, which is not the case. The Tories have already raised the tax burden by the equivalent of 7p on the standard rate of Income Tax.

Last July, the Prime Minister made a commitment to get rid of Inheritance Tax when, as he said, the Nation could afford it. This is absolutely grotesque and the figures that some people would save with abolition of the tax would dwarf the biggest national lottery win. We are talking telephone numbers here! Nevertheless, I would be surprised if it is in the Budget this time, although, no doubt, there will be a reference to it.

OUT AND ABOUT

On Wednesday of this week I met Mr. Jelpke, (I can never remember his first name) Managing Director of Burnley & Pendle Bus Company, in London at the Parliamentary Transport Group and I had an opportunity to speak to him about the latest developments at Burnley & Pendle. Peter Pike was also there, so we could swap notes.

Since the last GC I have been back to Edge End School; again visited Holy Trinity in Brierfield to see the plans for the new school which is to be constructed; and last night, I was at the West Craven high School's Awards Evening, giving out the prizes. I could get away from Westminster, as the Commons was considering the Chemical Weapons Bill in which Britain will ratify the Convention banning the use of chemical weapons. All Party agreement on that one, although we need to extend the principle to land mines and other weapons which maim and kill the innocent.

I have also been along to Smith & Nephew to look at how they make their new bandages and it is astonishing the transformation that has occurred over the last couple of years, with the investment of over £6 million. I have also been to see the management at Bairdtex. The Trawden firm is closing in January and I think it will take nothing short of a miracle to save them. The Baird Group is determined to get rid of the Trawden operation. I shall be discussing the issue next week with people in the industry at a meeting of the British Apparel Federation.

Other than that, I have been speaking on Cemfuel at a meeting organised by the local Friends of the Earth and dropped into the Brierfield Branch Meeting.

Got to go now.

GORDON PRENTICE MP

24.11.95.

REPORT TO THE G.C. OCTOBER 1995

With the Conference season behind us, politics is back with a vengeance. Locally, we have a major controversy over the proposed sale of Burnley & Pendle Transport and the Party is to be congratulated on the energetic campaign it is running. We have the ammunition here to blow the Liberals out of the water and their latest wheeze - the "tell the facts" meetings around Pendle is a sure sign of their desperation. I have in front of me as I write this a letter from the former General Manager of Burnley & Pendle Buses, until his retirement in 1986 and he, like so many others, is determined to keep the bus company under local control.

As it happens, the Transport Select Committee of the House of Commons looked at bus de-regulation earlier this year and will be bringing out a report in a few months time. Press reports suggest that the Government is going to take steps to re-regulate (in part at least) the industry. The report is expected to be very critical of the effects of de-regulation. Liberal MPs have also pointed to the disastrous impact of de-regulation. On 21 April last year Nick Harvey MP told the House that the total de-regulation of buses in the countryside had been "a disaster". He said passenger journeys had gone down by 16% in shire England. That is not the only thing that has gone down. Figures I have prised out of the DtI show the extent of the collapse of UK production of buses from 1979 - 1994. In 1979 we manufactured 25,531 buses. By 1994 we were manufacturing 9,566. I have also had it confirmed from the Transport Minister, Stephen Norris that the Government's policy is not to grant consent to a municipal bus sale - whether to a management/employee buy out or otherwise - unless it has followed a competitive tender. He also told me on Tuesday that "as and when a suitable legislative opportunity arises, we shall seek powers to compell authorities still owning bus companies to sell them".

Well, the clock may be ticking for Burnley & Pendle Bus Company, but it is also ticking for the Government and we are now getting so close to a General Election that I doubt very much if they will have room in their legislative programme to do what they threaten. An incoming Labour Government will re-regulate.

Another local issue which is getting a tremendous amount of coverage is the threatened reduced opening hours of Barnoldswick Police Station. The Barnoldswick Party Branch and the Town Council has done a great job in mobilizing public opinion and, for myself, I have raised this particular issue in the House. (I should have mentioned that I am trying deparately hard to get an early debate on the bus sale, but I have to take my chance along with all the other MPs).

Turning away from local issues, things have been coming to the boil at Westminster in what should have been a fairly quiet spill-over session which clears the legislation which could not be completed before the Summer Recess. Next week we will be

getting the Disability Discrimination Bill back from the Lords. Along with the Quickie Bill on the remission of sentences for Northern Ireland prisoners. On Thursday we shall be having a debate on Nolan and the standards of conduct in public life, to be followed a week on Monday by a very important debate on disclosure by MPs on outside earnings. We will be insisting on full disclosure, with the Tories doing everything in their power to resist it.

Out of the general blur of life at Westminster, one recent debate stands out and that was the unfortunate one on the Derek Lewis affair. Unfortunately, Jack foundered when he stumbled over a straightforward question from the Colchester Tory, Bernard Jenkin, who wanted to know if we would have sacked Lewis. Instead of saying we would never have appointed him in the first place, Jack hesitated and things rapidly unravelled. However, at Westminster, as elsewhere, the caravan passes and life goes on. And I still thing the abiding impression that people have is of a slimy and slippery Home Secretary, unable and unwilling to take responsibility for anything that happens in our prisons. For goodness sake Derek Lewis was appointed by Kenneth Clarke! The Conservative strategy is to suggest brazenly that the Opposition is responsible for all the failings of the Government.

The State Opening of Parliament is on 15 November and we have the Budget coming up on 28 November and we wait to see what the Chancellor is prepared to give away. If there are tax cuts and everyone expects there to be, it will be at the expense of programmes already starved for cash and it will be yet another attempt to bribe people into voting Conservative. If this doesn't work, the Tories have a few other things up their sleeve. There will be a new Asylum Seeker's Bill and perhaps something on ID cards, but whatever happens, they will play the race card.

Since the last GC we have had the Conservative and Labour Conferences, although such is the pace of events that these seem very distant now.

REPORT TO G.C. 29th SEPTEMBER 1995

This will be a short report because I have spent most of the day clearing my desk so that I can go off to the seaside with a clear conscience. Next week's Party Conference is important in a number of key respects. We have important policy documents to consider. Internal organisational matters to be resolved and we've got to project to the wider public the image of a government in waiting. Talk of "image" makes most people in the Party squirm (quite rightly) but perception is all in politics. We are certainly being treated as a government in waiting and I have never been invited to so many briefings by so many organisations with an interest in what an incoming Labour government would do.

Earlier today I was over in Halifax to talk to the Building Society people about Labour's Housing Policy. Their headquarters is an amazing monolith, completely dominating the town, and I told them from such a building they could rule the world! On Wednesday I was visiting a hill farm close to Littleborough with a Pendle hill farmer in tow. This was set up by the National Farmers Union, who are lobbying like mad on the question of hill livestock compensatory allowances. They say that hill farmers who run sheep on poor quality uplands have had a raw deal from the Government. And it is an astonishing fact that 40% of hill farmers earn less than £10,000 per year - and they work night and day to get that.

At the weekend I was involved in the very successful Open Britain Day with the Ramblers Association and there was masses of coverage in the press. I had written to Frank Dobson before the Rally impressing on him the importance of giving an unequivocal commitment to bring in an Access to Land Act. He did just that and it went down a treat with the people there and, I am sure, to the 100,000 members of the Ramblers Association across the country. Other than that, I have been out and about, dropping into branch meetings (I did a very interesting and stimulating one at Barrowford last night); meeting the West Craven separatists in "Unite Craven"; speaking to the ASDA shopworkers about their Share Option Scheme; getting engaged in the Cemfuel debate with Castle Cement over at Clitheroe and RATS (Residents Against Toxic Substances) and so on.

Local government is still very much in the news and the press is dominated by the goings on at Pendle Council, where the Liberals want to flog off the Burnley & Pendle Bus Company. The Labour Group is stoutly resisting this - as am I - and I know that Susan will be bringing us up to date. There is also the question of the Area Committees which is the flagship policy of the Liberal council. Beyond Pendle, we have now received the recommendations of the Local Government Commission for England on Blackpool and Blackburn and in each case they are recommending unitary councils. The new structure will cost money and has very little going for it. If Blackburn, why not Burnley, or Preston or Lancaster? My own position is well known. I am in favour of unitary authorities - because I believe they bring greater transparency and more accountability - but what is being proposed is neither fish nor fowl. The two-tier system continues over most of the County with two of the more densely populated areas wrenched out of it.

When the Conference is behind us I am sure we will all get a sense of the imminence of the next General Election. The Conservatives will be doing everything they possibly can to engineer tax cuts in the November Budget and they will be trying very hard not to step into elephant traps. The £50 giveaway to each electricity customer, which will be generated (no pun) by the flotation of the National Grid, will fool no one. North West Water tried a similar trick back in May when we all received cheques for £6 as our share of their "improved performance". What happened over the summer with the drought showed the exercise to be little other than a PR puff. The letter in May talked about compensation, but by the summer that had all been forgotten. In the same way everyone, I believe, has already discounted the National Grid bribe. For goodness sake the Grid belonged to us all before the Government gifted it to the Regional Electricity Companies.

Finally, there was talk at the last GC about that old favourite - newsletters. I have now leased a new computer which is now upstairs and is for the exclusive use of the Constituency Party.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
29.9.95.

Report to GC: 25 August 1995

One way or another, transport policy seems to have dominated this week. Yesterday morning, I had a slot on BBC Lancashire's Andy Peebles show taking about Labour's plans to re-regulate the buses. The free-for-all of recent years has seen fares rise dramatically while the number of bus companies has fallen. Stagecoach and the other big operators have taken over, or forced out of business, the competition - the so-called "bus wars".

Yesterday, we also heard about the decision to shelve the sale of the West Coast main line after Railtrack disclosed it needed £1 billion spent on it to bring it up to scratch - ie before the private sector would be interested in buying it. As part of the countdown to full privatisation, 25 privately owned "train operating companies" are to take over running the trains from British Rail. The Government wants 51% of these companies to be in the private sector by April of next year. Railtrack - which operates the track and signaling - is also to be sold off.

The man in charge of all this was here yesterday. John Watts, the Minister for Roads and Railways, finally made it to Pendle to hear the case for the Colne Foulridge By-pass and to travel the route. As Tory Ministers go, he is fairly affable but I have no illusions whatsoever about the prospects of getting the by-pass paid for by the Government or the other demand for the trunking of the A56 in place of the A59.

Out and About

After the Watts visit I went along to the Disability Consultation Forum at Nelson Town Hall to talk about the Government's Disability Discrimination Bill (which is currently in the Lords but will come back to the Commons in October) which sets up an advisory Disability Council "with gums" rather than a Commission "with teeth". The Bill falls far short of Roger Berry's Civil Rights Bill which the Government sabotaged last session but it is undoubtedly an improvement on what we have at the moment.

Earlier today, I visited Townhouse School in Nelson. Children with severe learning difficulties go there and I spent a useful hour chatting to the Head and others and having a look around.

Looking further back, I was at Barnoldswick Branch (my own one) on Tuesday and seem to have spent my time talking about the issue of the moment - water. The weather has changed and

continuing talk about a drought seems mildly absurd now but a farmer at one of my recent surgeries told me it would take weeks of solid rain to get the streams flowing again. The ground is so dry it will soak up the rain like blotting paper.

Last weekend lots of people were involved in one way or another with the VJ Commemoration services. On Sunday I was over in Blackburn at the cathedral for the County service which was full of pageantry and colour but solemn too. The Lord Lieutenant of Lancashire, Sir Simon Towneley, was there along with the entire "County set". The Ribble Valley MP, Nigel Evans was sitting in the pew behind mine when he sprang to attention as this tall, fairly elderly man walked past. They chatted and the man moved on. I asked him who the man was. "Oh him." said Evans. "He owns one of my villages!"

Back to the real world. The Government this month published its proposals for Digital Terrestrial Broadcasting and legislation will be introduced in the new Parliamentary session to allow the use of this new technology which will increase the number of channels we will be able to pick up from the four at present to about 20. This will be coming very soon indeed - the White Paper mentions 1998 - and it is just another one of these things likely to revolutionise the way we live our lives. Politically, it is incredibly important because people largely get their news and information (and often their opinions) from the box. I hope to get on to the Committee which will consider the Bill in detail.

Which brings me nicely on to the Labour Party. I received my ballot paper this morning for the NEC and we await to see what the collective view of the Party is on the candidates parading before it. Certainly, the Party is changing as the enormous increase in membership demonstrates. But what the membership's view may be on crucial policy questions is another matter entirely. I don't believe for one moment individual members will be balloted on whether they want to bring the railways back into public ownership!

Next month, of course, we have Robin Cook coming to Pendle and I hope we can get a good turnout. I am setting up a separate short meeting with a handful of local people who are very involved in the Kashmir issue.

I also hope to get round more branches over the coming weeks. On Sunday morning at 10am I am on Radio Lancs again. But who on earth listens at that time?

Gordon Prentice MP. 25.8.95

Report to Pendle GC: 28 July 1995

I am writing this (very brief note) on Monday, 24 July before disappearing for a couple of weeks on holiday. It has been a turbulent few months at Westminster and it proves the point yet again that, in politics, always expect the unexpected.

I read through the minutes of the last GC with some humility. I was absolutely certain Major would go - pushed out by a coalition of Tory MPs united only by their common belief that the Conservatives couldn't win the next General Election with Major at the helm. One third of the Conservative Parliamentary Party voted against him and yet, astonishingly, he is still there.

It suits us, of course. Major will be taking the Conservatives into the next General Election and he brings with him all the baggage of the past five years. The devaluation, the sleaze and all the other stuff. Nevertheless, the Government will be doing everything it can to win back the voters, so we should prepare ourselves for some breathtaking electoral bribes.

I shall, unfortunately, miss the Littleborough and Saddleworth Parliamentary by election and our own council by election in Bradley where our excellent candidate, Tony Leather, will undoubtedly win well. In both cases we are up against a common enemy in the Liberal Democrats. The mood I picked up from the voters in L&S was pretty good although we all recognise that L&S is a very hard nut to crack. The Liberals are well dug in there.

Out and about.

Last Friday, I visited Rolls Royce in Barnoldswick with the Shadow Defence Secretary, David Clark. In mid August, I shall be visiting British Aerospace and other aerospace firms in the area. (The reception I set up at the Commons (as part of the Council's Single Regeneration Budget bid) with Kawasaki, Pendle Council and various MPs/ministers seemed to go quite well and I keep my fingers crossed that something positive comes out of it.

On 24 August, the Roads Minister, John Watts, is coming to Pendle after his earlier planned visit was cancelled at the eleventh hour. And Robin Cook tells me he can give the Sydney Silverman lecture on Thursday 21 September. This is good news.

GP 24 July 1995

G.C. REPORT 30.6.95.

On Tuesday of this week I wrote a report to all CLP members, predicting that John Major would be ousted as Prime Minister. I still believe that, even though he turned in a bravura performance at Prime Minister's Questions yesterday. I have never seen him so sharp nor so witty and the lobby journalists afterwards were divided as to whether he was just demob happy, or whether we were seeing a "new" John Major ready to take his errant MPs on.

Whatever happens, we cannot lose from this. The Party will be tabling a no confidence motion, although my preference is to table it while the contest is still happening and not afterwards when there will be tremendous pressure on Tory MPs to rally round the new leader, whoever he or she may be.

What is happening at the moment is simply astonishing. On Wednesday night I was sharing a table with George Haworth in the dining room at our (ie the Opposition's) end. Traditionally the Tories sit at one end and we are down at the other, but there were so many Tory MPs whispering and plotting that Kenneth Clarke came down to our end with a few of his acolytes and rather ostentatiously ate at a table surrounded by Labour MPs!

All this has, of course, overshadowed important policy statements put out by the Party. We had David Blunkett's paper "Diversity and Excellence" which sets out Labour's new education policy. It proposes three types of schools, community, aided and foundation, the latter replacing the current grant maintained schools. The Education Team is naturally working hard to win people over, but it is fair to say that there are people in the Party who remain sceptical and that the policy has been devised so as not to alienate the GM schools. The new document sets out a number of key principles which include fair funding as between all three types and fair admissions policies, which are agreed locally but within criteria laid down by central government. Let me break off here and mention the very real problems we are having in Pendle where a fair number of parents have been to see me to say how upset they are that their children are not getting into their preferred schools. In some cases, students are being taken from one end of the constituency to the other and this cannot be right.

We also have a new policy document, published yesterday, on the NHS which proposes the abolition of the internal market and three cheers for that. Trusts will no longer be allowed to own their assets and these will be taken back into a "renationalised" "NHS". GP fund holding will also be replaced and every GP will have an opportunity to have a say in commissioning care. Although I am not entirely sure how this is to work out in practice. We will certainly clear out the Trust Boards and get representatives of the community into positions where they can influence the workings of our Health Service at local level.

Other than that, we have had a policy statement from Jack Straw on "Nasty Neighbours" and while there is an obvious problem, I think we must be careful not to go overboard in our response to these matters. We shall be bringing back the stocks next! I do know from my surgeries that lots of people are totally brassed off with noisy neighbours and I have been pressing for some time for the local council to set up a party patrol. I know this will cost money, but I am sure it would be immensely popular.

Elsewhere at Westminster, the Government really is in a state of paralysis while the Tory leadership contest unfolds. But there are one or two interesting things to report. Earlier this week I asked the Education Secretary what was happening to the pledge to give three and four year olds nursery education if their parents want it. Gillian Shephard told me that a voucher scheme for four year olds is to be announced shortly, but nothing is planned for the three year olds. This is another issue which has tremendous resonance amongst the voters and a clear cut commitment from us to bring in nursery education for three and four year olds would go down a treat.

On the legislative front, the Job Seekers Bill has come back to the Commons from the Lords and it will soon become law. It is a blatant attempt to force down wages and will remove benefit from people who are unemployed after 6 months instead of a year as at present. The Pensions Bill is coming back to the Commons next week (this equalizes the pension age for men and women at 65). Also coming up next week are the orders to implement the new Parliamentary boundaries in England. There are any number of MPs (mostly Tories I have to say) who are spitting blood at what the Commission came up with. For myself, I heave a massive sigh of relief that we all did the business in Preston 18 months ago and managed to persuade the Boundary Commission to leave Pendle alone and not take in the three Ribble Valley wards of Reed, Sabden & Simonstone.

I am still working in the Parliamentary equivalent in the Gulag, in the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Select Committee, although we are now, thank goodness, coming to the end of our work. Since February we have been examining the line of the new high speed railway from the Channel to St. Pancras and when it is completed it will open up tremendous new possibilities for the North West provided we get proper link. I am also on the new Deregulation Select Committee and our every move is being filmed by the BBC who will be putting out a documentary about our work in the autumn.

As far as local issues are concerned, I have been meeting the people from Pendle Partnership about this year's bid under the Single Regeneration Budget. Last year, there was an unholy row when the Liberals tried to pin the failure of their bid on me. There is no possibility of anything remotely similar happening this year in the light of the tremendous fuss I have made. Next week I shall be speaking at a Lobby in London on Kashmir as this is an issue of tremendous concern to large numbers of the local Asian community. I shall also be meeting people from Nynex - the company responsible for digging up so many of our local roads for cable television. Later in the month I shall be meeting the top brass at Colne Police Station to discuss their new divisional plan and on 21 July I shall be visiting Smith & Nephew's Brierfield Plant with, wait for it, Virginia Bottomley! The annual Mayoral trip to the House of Commons is also next month.

Finally, we have the Littleborough & Saddleworth By-election to look forward to and I shall be going over there just as often as I can, without, of course, neglecting Bradley, where the Council by-election has been called for 3 August.

I am still beaver away on the Churchill papers issue and also on another fixation of mine - abuses of the taxation system. There is a rich seam to be mined!

GORDON PRENTICE MP
30.6.95.

REPORT TO G.C. - 26 MAY 1995

Harry Lees' death came as a terrible shock to us all, even though we knew he was suffering from a terminal illness. He was always a good friend to me and I am sure his contribution in the Council will be sorely missed. Unfortunately, I couldn't get to the funeral, but I have written to Mary expressing my own and the Party's sympathy.

I have also just heard today of the tragic death of Dr. Fred Archer who took over as Chair of Burnley Health Care Trust in very difficult times, following the resignation of James Rawson. I never had the opportunity to get to know him well, but he came across as someone who was willing to be open and honest in his dealings with the staff and wider community. The Trust faces yet more uncertainty.

We also had, earlier this week, the death of Harold Wilson who had been suffering for many years from Alzheimer's Disease. There was a tragic occasion in the Lords not long ago when he was sitting next to Jim Callaghan and did not know him. However, we all remember Harold Wilson as the man who won four out of five General Elections and who made a difference, introducing race and sex equality legislation, health & safety at work, the Open University and much else besides. I was in the Chamber to hear the tributes paid to him. Some were moving others very funny. A few both.

Time moves so quickly. It is difficult to believe the local elections took place this month and left us with a Liberal controlled council. Fortunately, we all know what we have to do to retrieve the situation. We've got to do our newsletters and surgeries and publicize what we are doing. Frank Dobson once said to me "in politics never do good by stealth". So, we have got to tell people outside just what the Liberals are up to and I have asked the office to clip references to the Liberals in the local press for circulation to Labour Councillors. I hope this helps. As far as newsletters are concerned, we need someone at the centre to pull everything together and to make sure it happens.

Still on the Liberals, the world has been told today that they are dropping their policy of equidistance and that in the event of a hung Parliament after the next election, they will not prop up a minority Conservative government. In present circumstances, who would expect them to! I very much doubt if this statement from Paddy Ashdown will do anything to alter the low cunning and often vitriolic behaviour of our local Liberals. I said at the Executive this month, we need to rigorously monitor what they do and say, especially their vague, unfolding policy on local area committees.

AT WESTMINSTER

At Westminster, things are buzzing. There has been a tremendous amount of things happening over recent weeks, not least the Nolan Committee and its recommendations to snuff out Tory sleaze. It has got to the stage where we are all getting thoroughly fed up with the cascade of revelations which I think has done massive damage to the reputation of Parliament (such as it is) and to MPs in general. The public must think we are all the same, in it to line our pockets, representing any old interest under the sun, for a fee. The sooner we have total openness and transparency the better. As you know, a committee of MPs is being set up to bring forward resolutions to implement Nolan.

It seems that we have been given assurances by the Prime Minister that this is not a delaying tactic and this committee will not try to nobble Nolan, but will look at ways of implementing its recommendations speedily. If the Tories start getting cold feet, I believe we should pull out of the committee and, to be fair, I think this is a view shared by all my colleagues.

Over the past week we have had three important statements from the Government on competitiveness, media ownership and identity cards. On competition, despite all the rhetoric, we are perceptibly losing ground to our competitors and to make up the difference needs positive and energetic support from the State. Look at the absurd situation we have concerning rolling-stock, where the train manufacturing plant in York is being closed down, when so many of our trains are totally clapped-out and need replacing. Nearer to home, we have Aerospace, where we have lost ground since 1979 in terms of world market share and have now been over taken by the French.

Turning now to media ownership. I think the Government has been brave to restrict the ability of Rupert Murdoch (and people like him) to extend their control over the press and broadcasting media. They say they want diversity and that must be right. The Conservatives risk upsetting Murdoch in the run up to the General Election and I suppose they deserve credit for that. Finally, we come to ID cards and the Green Paper just issued. It is a consultative document and the Government will decide which way to jump in the Autumn when it has analyzed the results of the consultation. I am dead against any suggestion of compulsory ID cards. It would only be a matter of a short time before the police, and indeed many other people, would demand sight of the card. The new smart cards can hold masses of information from Social Security and health information to credit ratings, personal identification marks and much other besides. The possibilities of abuse are obvious.

Turning back to local matters, the Roads Minister, John Watts MP, will be coming to Pendle on 5 June to have a look at the A56/A59 and the bottle-neck in Colne. It would be a miracle if the visit changes his mind and the Government suddenly announce a by-pass, but it does give us a valuable opportunity to bend his ear.

Finally, the death of Tory MP Geoffrey Dickins over in Littleborough & Saddleworth means yet another by-election. The Conservative majority at Westminster is rapidly eroding and is now down, I think, to ten. If the Grim Reaper carries on like this (and thoughtfully spares those on our side!) we could have a General Election sooner than we think.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
26.5.95.

REPORT TO G.C. - 31 March 1995

I am writing this on Friday afternoon and we shall be having a further discussion this evening about Clause 4. When we had a debate last December at the Municipal Hall in Colne, I recall saying then that Clause 4 was an icon (Donald Mitchell said it was a talisman!) that distinguished the Party from others. It was a kind of ideological sheet anchor that very few people indeed took literally. I would have left Clause 4 alone, but if there is to be a change, then we must be very clear about what an incoming Labour government is promising the electorate. And I will be saying a few words about this tonight. Despite all the talk about change, in reality, the Labour Party is deeply conservative. That is as may be, but we need to win the General Election (and indeed the forthcoming local elections) not for ourselves, but for the people outside who are looking to us to rescue them from the Conservatives who have been in power for too long. And it shows.

AT WESTMINSTER

We have been locked in debate about the crisis in our schools and I have had a sackful of mail from local parents, school governors and teachers. Schools are desperately anxious about the future. In some cases, modest nest eggs, built up over the years, will have to be plundered, class sizes will inevitably increase as teachers lose their jobs. Indeed, I see that Martin Burgess and the Governors at Edge End have forecast that seven job losses may be required and they are considering adopting a deficit budget. I have had representations from West Craven, Park High, Walton and others and people just refuse to accept that the Government can agree the recommendations of the Teachers' Review Body and then refuse to fully fund it. I have written to Gillian Shephard to ask for a meeting to discuss the crisis in local schools.

There is also the simmering discontent within the NHS and every day brings more letters complaining about the 1% to nurses which is to be topped up to 3% or thereabouts after negotiations with local Trusts. Although most settlements to date are around the 3% mark, there is no guarantee that this will be the position for every Trust in the country.

Still on health matters, on Wednesday night we debated the Order which will bring into law the increase in prescription charges which were announced last month. Prescriptions will now cost £5.25 - even though almost half of all prescriptions cost less than that. We have seen enormous hikes in charges - well over inflation - over the last 4 years. This year the increase was 10.4% Since 1979 (when prescriptions cost 20p) there have been 17 increases and if these increases had kept pace with inflation, the prescription would cost only 53p and not £5.25.

I also see in today's papers that North West Water is "paying back £180 million from a hidden reservoir". This means we will all get an annual repayment of £6.50 (big deal!) and shareholders will get another 4.75% a share special dividend. Why were we not told about this situation months ago, that water companies were awash with cash? And why was I told a few months ago that work on replacing the Foulridge main (the leakiest main in Lancashire) had to be delayed because of lack of cash? I have now written to Sir Desmond Pitcher in the wake of these revelations asking him to bring forward this much needed work in Pendle.

ELSEWHERE IN WESTMINSTER

For weeks now, I have been closeted 3 days a week in the Select Committee on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Bill. We are looking at the planned route from the Channel Tunnel portal to St. Pancras, listening to local objections and eventually making recommendations in a report to the House on the precise line of the fixed link. The Bill, which will bring this into law, will be brought forward in the next Session and I shall probably find myself on that as well! The important thing for me is to ensure that we have a proper high-speed link which can take traffic from the North West to the Continent at double quick time.

I am also on the new Select Committee on Deregulation, which will be looking not just at deregulation, but also contracting-out. Yesterday, for example, we were debating an Order which will contract out services of Companies House to private companies. Is nothing sacred? Companies House can sanction the late lodging of accounts and such like and this is a power which could conceivably be transferred to the private sector. No one wants this contracting-out, but the Government is determined to push ahead.

On local government issues, we had the publication yesterday of the Audit Commission Report which lists all councils in the country in league tables according to their performance in a range of functions. In most, Pendle seems to be about average, but I have not gone through it in detail yet.

We also have another major Bill coming up just after Easter - the Environment Bill - which makes big changes in Environmental Protection, the National Parks and such like. I shall be keeping a close interest in this one.

EMPLOYMENT

I want to say a few words this evening about the Labour Party's policy to get people back to work, as it has always been my view that our central objective should be the maintenance of full employment. Last week, I was one of a small number of Labour MPs with an interest in Treasury matters, who went along to the Bank of England to meet the Governor, Eddie George and the rest of the top brass. Their complacency was awesome and the whole lot need to be cleared out on day one of the next Labour Government. We kept getting this incantation from Eddie George that price stability was absolutely the central goal for the Bank and that the performance of the real economy was a secondary consideration. His thesis was that low inflation would ensure that things worked out at the end of the day. However, life is not so simple and we have seen major areas of British industry either close down or transfer to foreign ownership. Here in Pendle, we have Silentnight and Albert Hartley running a three day week (probably because of the depressed housing market) and we had the astonishing decision of British Aerospace to sell Rover to BMW. BAe said they needed the money to develop the aerospace core business, but what does it say when we allow a profitable car business like Rover to go to the Germans. When pressed on this, the top brass at the Bank said ownership did not matter and what was important was that jobs were created here by the Japanese or whoever.

CAMPAIGNS

As usual, I have a number of campaigns running along. The TV campaign - to get North West TV into the 25% of the constituency which gets TV from Leeds - which has been going for about 18 months now will hopefully bear fruit and we have had people from Granada down in Barnoldswick and Earby to check the signals and they are producing a report. If we make no progress on this, then I shall be seeking a meeting face to face with the Heritage Secretary, Stephen Dorrell. I am also continuing my (obsessive) campaign against Lord Archer and his share dealing and, hopefully, we shall see him behind bars in the not too distant future. I should also mention that I have written to the Roads Minister, John Watts, inviting him to Pendle to discuss further the by-pass issue and I shall be speaking to the Kelbrook and Earby people about this later next month.

OUT AND ABOUT

Last Friday I was at Park High School to look at an exhibition prepared by some of the students and also to have a word with the Head.

Coming up are visits to British Aerospace at Salmesbury, East Lancashire Health Authority to discuss their purchasing policies and a visit to the Headquarters of the Lancashire Ambulance Service which is so much in the news at the moment.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
31.3.95.

REPORT TO PENDLE GC: 27 FEBRUARY 1995

I am writing this just after 3 o'clock on Friday afternoon with the world outside looking something like Siberia. I had given my apologies for this meeting to the E.C. last week, as I thought I would be on an All Party Delegation to Kashmir. I am told there were problems with the Pakistan Prime Minister's diary and the visit was cancelled and will, no doubt, be rearranged at some mutually convenient time in the future.

There are lots of interesting things happening locally, including a deputation to see the Roads Minister next month about the trunking of the A56 and the Colne/Foulridge, Kelbrook/Earby bypasses. This has all the potential for going badly wrong, given the propensity of the local Liberals to make whatever mischief they can out of any contact with County Hall. I am working closely with Denis Golden to make sure we are working to the same agenda and we do not allow the Liberals to hijack the issue and use it for their own purposes.

Still on the Liberals, we have had a couple of amusing stories concerning Doris Allen and David Whipp, which I hope the Party will exploit. In this connection, the office has put together a couple of mock-ups of the "Talk of the Town" (provisional title) which I hope we will circulate on a frequent and regular basis. I had a discussion at the Party Executive about this, they were keen to see it go ahead. I am also circulating tonight a provisional schedule which sets out the dates when the newsletters are prepared, printed and delivered.

Still on local matters, the debate in the Commons on the Revenue Support Grant Settlement for 1995/96 is coming up on Wednesday and I hope (as they say) to catch the Speaker's eye. Pendle, and indeed Lancashire, has had a dreadful settlement and it is going to make life very difficult for our Councillors at the Town Hall. Still on Local Government, the Party is publishing this week a consultative document on Local Government under Labour. It is a good package of proposals which enhances the powers and freedoms of councils and allows them flexibility to delivery services and consult local people in innovative ways.

AT WESTMINSTER

Much is happening. On Thursday my colleague Dale Cambell-Savours, was thrown out of the Chamber after raising one of my favourite subjects - the criminality of Lord Archer. I was trying my hardest to get in on the back of his questions, but the whole thing just dissolved into chaos after he was ordered out by the Speaker. I am not letting go of the Archer affair unless and until I receive satisfactory answers from him to the questions I have raised.

On the legislative front, a lot is happening. The Job Seekers Bill has gone into Committee and we have had the Government produce its own Disability Discrimination Bill which falls far short of Roger Berry's Private Members Bill which the Government sabotaged last year. Harry Barnes MP, who was successful in the ballot for Bills, is re-introducing the Berry Bill on Disabled Civil Rights on 10 February and I shall be there voting for it. Coming up is the controversial Pensions Bill (it is currently in the Lords) which will raise the retirement age for women to 65. We can also expect the Environment Bill which brings together the Pollution Inspectorate and National Rivers Authority in a new Environment Agency. It also

establishes new Authorities for National Parks. I am keen to get on this Bill, not least because I only live 20 minutes drive away from the Yorkshire Dale National Park!

As far as the Party is concerned, we have gone through a rocky patch with all the stuff on education, devolution and now Clause 4. I have written my February all members newsletter which the office will be sending out on Monday 30 January which touches on these issues and also on the by-election which is coming up on 2 March.

Gordon Prentice MP
27 February 1995

Barnoldswick Branch Meeting: 23 November 1994 Report from Gordon Prentice MP

Dear Everyone

I am sorry I cannot be with you this evening and I have asked Ann, as Branch Secretary, to give my apologies. I must be here at Westminster as there is a three line whip on and there will be a ten o'clock vote on the Queen's Speech. I am going to keep this note pretty short as I was with the Branch at the August meeting and I think you are all pretty familiar with my views on things generally.

The promised legislation is all pretty familiar. I think I mentioned some of the proposals at the August meeting. We shall have the so called "Jobseeker's Allowance" and a Bill to raise the retirement age of women to 65 - but no Post Office privatisation. This is a real victory and a tribute to the hard work of the UCW (and the Barlick Branch) who campaigned so effectively in Pendle.

But this week's headlines have been dominated by the news of the grotesque 75% pay rise for the Chief Executive of British Gas and the leaked "Yobs" memo from the Vice Chairman of the Conservative Party who admits what everyone knows - the Government is deeply unpopular.

Building Support

However, we cannot rely on the Government's unpopularity to carry Labour into power. We must develop our own agenda and work to build support for the Party. This is what I have tried to do since my selection as PPC in October 1990 and as MP for Pendle since April 1992. I have included a very familiar bar chart which shows what happened in the last three General Elections. The Tory vote in Pendle is big and resilient. However, there is no Tory majority. John Lee held the seat for the Tories for 13 years only because the anti Tory vote was split.

The bar chart shows there was a straight shift of votes from the Liberals to Labour in April 1992 - and I think that will happen again at the next General Election. There is a big Liberal vote here in West Craven. It is well dug in but it can be detached (certainly at Parliamentary elections) and it will come over to Labour. West Craven is therefore critically important in terms of winning and holding the Pendle seat. I set out my thinking on this in the

under
the
line

and in the
all from
in

Gen Election 83, 87 and 92	1983	1987	1992
Labour	16604	18370	23497
Con	22739	21009	21384
Lib Dem	12056	12662	7976
Anti Federalist			263

Unsuccessful in ballot for Private Members Bills
- so no ~~land~~ access to Land Bill.

Quinn Jamison - canoeing, activity/adventure camps.

Report to Pendle GC: 25 November 1994

This will be another very short report as I'm pressed for time and the photocopier is playing up again. It has been a momentous week and I hardly know where to begin.

We've had the debate on the Queen's Speech and I won't go into any of that as everyone is very familiar now with its contents. Just one point. The Post Office is apparently to be allowed to twist in the wind as a punishment for the Government's failure to get its privatisation plans through the Commons.

commercial
freedom
PO to sell
insurance
etc. Faint
ventures
with
publishers
etc

This week, the Government has released details of its proposals to tackle discrimination against disabled people. They don't go far enough. Also yesterday, the Government told the Commons that Railtrack is going to be sold off generating £6.5 billion - to be used to help bring the standard rate of income tax down to 20p. This is the Tory strategy for winning the next General Election. VAT can soar. Other taxes can be introduced yet if the standard rate of income tax goes down then the Tories claim they are the tax cutting party.

East
Lancs
live?
broadbands

I mentioned the next General Election which may be called on Monday although I doubt it. That's when we have the debate on the Euro funding Bill which we shall be voting against. Our amendment is linking payment to effective action against Euro fraud and reform of the CAP.

Natwest free

The Budget

Also next week is the Budget and we will be moving amendments to scrap the imposition of VAT on fuel. We also want to see some fairness in the tax system but I very much doubt we shall see it. What better evidence of Tory values was the sight earlier this week of Cedric Brown, the Chief Executive of British Gas, scooping a pay rise of £205,000 - 75% - and the Prime Minister being unwilling to condemn it outright and refusing to do anything about it.

Locally, things are churning away too. The final curtain has yet to fall on the drama at Burnley Heath Care NHS Trust although one of the main cast bowed out - James Rawson resigned. (Sorry, the prose got a little bit purple there!) Peter Pike has managed to get an adjournment debate in the Commons on Monday evening - after the Euro vote) and I shall be there to support him. I too put

Employees
→ 25 exempt
practical
removal
obstacles
must be
readily
achievable.

Labour
Against PR - Coalition

race - sex
unemployed Chair 4

in for a debate but Peter was successful and I shall be there in a supporting role.

part IV

School Visits

new
Peter Phil

NRC

1/2 on the table

GNVQs

School
leagues
tables.

There is also the controversy over Edge End and I see there is to be a debate on this tonight. This is good. It is a matter that needs to be discussed sensitively and intelligently. There are other important policy issues involved and these need to be addressed. I shall be making my own submission to County Hall next week. A couple of weeks ago I visited the school again and had a good discussion with the Head, Martin Burgess.

some other
high school
Cyril Hughes
Ted Wharton
Ken Spence

I seem to be spending a lot of time in local schools recently. Earlier today I was at the opening of the new St Joseph's RC Primary School in Barnoldswick and last Friday I visited Holy Trinity primary in Brierfield to see the state of the building and meet the teachers and children. Also, last week, I officially opened the new library at West Street School in Colne. I thoroughly enjoyed the concert the school put on.

Hill
farmers.

A couple of final thoughts. The country is in deep troubled because we are deindustrialising. We are not making things any more. For a year or so I have been using the car industry an example of what is happening. I used to say that the only car firms that were British owned are Robin Reliant and Rolls Royce. Times change. I read this week that Robin Reliant has gone into receivership. And Rolls Royce is looking to Mercedes to supply the engine for their new model.

- don't have
the capacity
make things.
- lack of
investment

Back to the Health Service. After the debacle at Burnley NHS Trust, I am forwarding nominations to the Chairman of the North West Regional Health Authority, Sir Donald Wilson (also President of the Chester Conservative Association). If you have a track record in health issues and are interested get back to be and we can speak about it.

Tenon
forum

Got to go now.

Bastards now
Yobs

Gordon Prentice MP.
25 November 1994

local party re organisation

Vice Chairman of Council

Cord Barker doesn't reply
Patrick Nicholls - Superintendents → French collaborators
→ German war mongers

ABOUT THE HOUSE

with Gordon Prentice MP



What shall I do with the Brownies?

What do you do with Brownies at Westminster? In the next week or two I'm expecting a pack of them from Pendle to drop in on me as part of a longer visit to the capital.

I have been thinking about how to keep up to 30 little pixies and elves interested and amused as they follow me around the precincts of the Palace of Westminster, built on a bed of concrete 10 feet thick, with 1,100 rooms, 100 staircases, 35 passenger lifts and 2 miles of passages. I can't send them up Big Ben - which is something I like to arrange for (fit and healthy) constituents because there is an age bar and they're below it.

I get a regular stream of people from Pendle dropping into the House of Commons and, if I am free, I always like to say hello and show them round. But there is a (non-cash!) price to be paid by the visitor. My commentary on the crenellations, architecture and history of Parliament is never entirely neutral nor, in the jargon, *value free*. I always like to inject a little bit of politics into it.

For example, at Westminster there are two classes of people - the Members (like me) and the Strangers (like you). The former are treated with great reverence by the Palace functionaries and the latter are just about tolerated. This disdainful attitude doesn't apply to the behaviour of the MPs who strive mightily to be charming and pleasant to their constituents. They - unlike the Palace functionaries - all have a vote!

This time, I can't give my little visitors the usual spiel - which is to describe the magnificent surroundings of the Palace and then explain why it desperately needs to be reformed. Our creaking

and antique unwritten constitution is next to impossible to change - which is why the absurdity of the hereditary House of Lords has survived for so long.

Most of the Palace is relatively modern. It dates from the mid 19th century and was built to replace the old one that burned down in the great fire of 1834. Fortunately, the historic Westminster Hall was saved and it is one of the few surviving gems from the medieval period. It dates from just after the Norman Conquest and the hammer beam timber roof, dating from 1399, is magnificent.

The Hall was used for all the great state ceremonies and the last coronation banquet was held there in 1821. The King's Champion, in a full set of armour, rode into the Hall demanding to know if anyone present was foolish enough to challenge the right of George IV to take the throne. Silence. And the Champion clattered out again, no doubt relieved.

Westminster Hall is witness to some of the greatest events in English history. It was here that Guy Fawkes was tried after his Gunpowder Plot turned out to be a damp squib. And it was here, too, that Charles I, proclaiming to the bitter end the divine right of Kings to rule, was sentenced to death.

It was in Westminster Hall that Oliver Cromwell took the oath as Lord Protector of England in 1653. But he, like Charles I, came to a sticky end. In 1661 his body was exhumed and his severed head was stuck on a pole and left on the roof of the Hall for twenty three years, until 1684.

Now, I'm sure Brown Owl could handle this gruesome stuff but is it really something I should tell the Brownies?

Gordon Prentice MP

(161/94. 8 June 94)

REPORT TO PENDLE GC: 29 JULY 94

Parliament has now gone into recess and the standing of the Government is now lower than ever. We have just heard that Lord Archer has not been implicated in the Anglia TV shares scam, but since the Inspector's report is not published, we will not have access to all the information. However, we do know that a couple of sticky fingered Tory MPs were prepared to accept £1000 for tabling a Parliamentary Question and it is amazing they have not resigned their seats.

I have written to the Chairman of North West Water to ask him for details of the money paid to Sir Malcolm Thornton who is, apparently, a "Parliamentary Consultant to NWW" and I wait with interest to see what he has to do to "earn" his remuneration.

WE ARE ALL BEING SOAKED!

We have also just heard of the new price controls for the water industry and these are too little too late. Water is a big issue here in Pendle and over recent months the problems over the Foulridge main, the Barrowford flooding and the sewage works at Stocks Beck have all hit the headlines in the local press. OFWAT has told NWW that it can increase its prices annually by two and a half percent over inflation. The company's latest pre tax profits come in at £269 million, which is the fourth biggest of the eleven water companies in England. The average bill here in the North West has gone up by over 60% since privatisation and now stands at £183. What is happening in the water industry has tremendous resonance with the wider public, who are fed up with enormous boardroom salary hikes.

Earlier this month we had the publication of the DSS book on households below average income, which makes truly horrifying reading. If Prince Philip had access to this document a month or two ago, he would have thought twice before telling us all that there was no such thing as absolute poverty in Britain.

POST OFFICE CAMPAIGN

Although Westminster has shut up shop for the time being, a tide of mail continues to come into the office, prompted by our very successful Post Office Campaign. Every delivery brings more letters from people resolutely opposed to the privatisation of the Post Office. I am also getting a good response from the (resurrected) TV coverage campaign and I have also been getting a sprinkling of letters about the TV licence business. The Government has also published its plans for NHS Dentistry and I am writing to all Dentists in the area. Next week I shall be getting letters out to people in Barnoldswick about the threat to the Delivery Office there and the people employed by the Post Office over there have done a magnificent job in getting about two and a half thousand names on petitions. The proposed privatisation of the Post Office is going to be one of the big issues in the new Parliamentary session in the autumn and I am keeping my fingers crossed that I shall be allocated a place on the Bill.

The other significant legislative proposal is the one equalising retirement at 65 for women and again, this will generate a lot of publicity. I have to say that when the proposals were first published, I was astonished by the fairly muted response. Still on the campaigning side, I am conducting a survey on "no go" areas in Pendle. I feel very strongly that uncultivated moorland should be open to the public and I think it is about time we published this - perhaps by organizing a mass trespass. Any volunteers?

The other important issue coming up is, of course, Local Government Reorganisation. Lancashire County Council - or rather the Friends of Lancashire - are spending an absolute fortune on newspaper advertisements and it may well be that people will settle for the status quo as the least worse option. My own view is to go for a unitary local authority as I believe this would mean more transparency and greater accountability. However, I think there is a very real chance that the Government will just drop the whole thing on the grounds that it is now just too hot to handle.

On the Party side, we now have a new Leader and Deputy Leader and we must give them both every support. It is difficult not to feel some sympathy for Margaret Beckett, as she did an excellent job as acting Leader. Still, Margaret will pick herself up and get stuck in, as is the way of things in politics.

PENDLE TO STAY AS IS

Still on things Parliamentary. It was with tremendous relief that I learned earlier this month that the Parliamentary Boundary Commission had decided to leave Pendle Constituency boundaries as they are. This is indeed a triumph, as three thousand voters from the Ribble Valley would have made it much more difficult to hold the Seat. My thanks go to all those who lobbied the Commission so successfully.

I am still doing my stint with BT and I spent an interesting day yesterday at their AGM in London. I had the opportunity to speak to the Unions down there, who lobbied the meeting about job losses. Earlier this week I spent an afternoon with their Mobile phone people in Leeds and I also spent some time in Blackburn having a close look at their malicious calls unit.

At Westminster I have had a steady stream of visitors - from the famous Brownie pack to the Mayor & Mayoress - a local headmaster and - Alan!

Over the summer I hope to get round as many of the branch meetings as I possibly can and I shall be taking some time out to visit other constituencies as part of the PLP Target 96 Initiative, where MPs visit constituencies we need to win next time to get a Labour Government.

Gordon Prentice MP

29th July 1994

Curdip. - really hard work
Students today
Royal Yacht.

mid summers day.
Cabinet reshuffle
- Norman Fowler work over.

REPORT TO G.C. - 24 JUNE 1994

First things first. I am sorry to hear that Mike and Gill will be leaving us. The news came as a bolt from the blue and although Mike has not been in the Chair for very long, he has been centrally involved in the work of the party for a number of years. They will both be missed and I wish them well.

PARTY BOUNDARIES
21 JULY
THURS

Life has been fairly hectic for me both at Westminster and here in the constituency. Last week, at long last, I had lunch with Ian Lockwood the editor of the Craven Herald and I think we have now mended some broken fences. Everything went spinning out of control some months ago when I accused him of being the editor of a "Tory rag". He has studiously refused to give me any coverage at all, but I am hopeful that this may change now after our chat. I told him it was simply astonishing that, for example, the coverage he gave to the Paul Goodall (of Earby) murder relegated my comments to the penultimate paragraph, after David Curry had said his piece. I have been beaver away on this tragic case for months - without, I have to say, courting publicity. On another matter entirely, Lockwood is extremely fired up about Local Government Reorganisation and he has offered me a column to set out my views. I intend to take this up.

2,100
vs
2600
Basil
+ Emily.

COUNCIL REVIEW

And talking of the Council Review, we now have the report on Lancashire which is now out for consultation and at last we have something hard to go on. I shall be spending some time next week at the ADC Conference in Harrogate, chairing a seminar on the staffing implications of Reorganisation. There is clearly much to discuss.

Parties national policy
unitary authorities

(no
cross
border
reorg.)

Next week we also have the Monklands By-Election caused by the death of John Smith and while we must surely hold it, there is certain to be a strong SNP challenge. North of the border the SNP often play the role allocated to the Liberal Democrats here in England. Also coming up in the next week or two will be the Government's long awaited Green Paper on the future of the post office. Never has an issue been trailed at such length and amid such confusion. We have been told that Post Office Counters (i.e. sub post offices) is not to be privatised - although Crown Post Offices are still to be franchised - but there have been all sorts of suggestions about the remaining elements (Parcelforce and Royal Mail). It has even been suggested that the Royal Mail could be privatised in regional companies.

The office at Carr Road is geared up and we have a data base bulging with thousands of names who will receive a letter from me with details of the Green Paper as soon as it is available. We are also actively involved in the Delivery Office issue at Barnoldswick.

RAIL STRIKE

As I write, the rail strike is still unresolved and it is not entirely clear how it can be satisfactorily settled, given the Government's determination to pull the strings. I think it is perfectly obvious that Railtrack would have settled for just over 5% had there not been overt pressure from MacGregor and No. 10. Our position must be to blame the strike on the Government, who see the continuation of the dispute to be in their interest. It is certainly not in the interest of the travelling public, the signalling staff, Railtrack or the Labour Party for it to drag on unresolved.

don't get
involved

Parliament

rail privatisation
non irreversibility of failure.

Patten £60k was
not a bid

David Boothby £200,000
costs against Philip
Oppenheim at Amber Valley.

when does the

Before I close, I do want to thank again Austin and Amanda McBride for their efforts in putting on what was a very successful Asian Banquet Evening last Saturday at Brierfield Community Hall. It raised much needed cash for the Party and it was in every respect a worthwhile initiative which was strongly supported by our friends in Burnley. Apart from Peter Pike MP, we also had our new MEP, Mark Hendrick, along who spoke about his successful campaign.

This brings me neatly to the leadership. I have made my position clear in that I have nominated Margaret Beckett MP for Leader and Deputy as I want to see, apart from anything else, a woman in the leadership team. I understand that the GC has instructed me to vote for someone else, but there is no possibility of me taking instructions on this, any more than I would expect our new MEP, Mark, whose vote has exactly the same weighting as mine, to follow instructions from his Euro CLP. It is an electoral college and we all form our own judgements.

DEBATES

Coming up early next month I have an important meeting with the Chairman and Board members of Rolls Royce.

NOT IN FAVOUR OF FEDERAL UNION - *not in favour of pulling out - FALSE CHOICE*

GORDON PRENTICE MP
24.6.94.

*single economic policy
single channels of exchange
even pol favouring Ge/France
Beckett*

Not in favour of Single Currency

ECONOMIC
CONVERGENCE

Can
→ Tax on currency speculation
→ No tax on currency transactions to finance tradeable goods + services.

→ What's happening in real economy

ALIENATED from *Common*
Democracy + Transparency
+ owning institutions +
involvement + being able to influence movements

*single taxation
currency
transfers to prices
(lost)*

Report to Pendle GC: 27 May 1994

So much has happened since the last GC I hardly know where to begin. But, for me as for millions of others, it was the death of John Smith that had us all reeling. His premature death has completely altered the political landscape and we must all take stock and consider the implications.

We will have a new Leader (and, perhaps, new Deputy Leader of the Party) by the end of July. The campaign for the leadership will not, of course, start until after the Euro Elections but, even now, people are lining up behind their favoured candidates. I genuinely hope this campaign will stress the positive attributes of each of the candidates (for they all have their separate and different strengths) and that we will learn in detail about their policy preferences as well as their general approach. As I said in the Nelson Leader last week, I am sure the campaign will be conducted fairly and without rancour because if it isn't we all lose. As it is, I welcome the July date (rather than October) and I welcome a genuine contest (rather than someone simply emerging as a result of wheeling and dealing at Westminster).

We must not be distracted by the Leadership issue to the extent of neglecting the Euro campaign. For most people, Europe is remote and probably not very interesting and it will be a devil of a job persuading them to go to the polls. But we must do it. The result will wash through domestic politics and could fatally damage the Conservatives.

Lancashire Central is one of our target seats and our candidate, Mark Hendrick, is carrying the Party's standard and deserves our support. We need people to deliver material and put up posters. So make a point of doing your bit.

The other important event of recent weeks was the local election here in Pendle and the formation of a new Liberal/Conservative administration. Everything I want to say has already been said in my Parliamentary Report which I circulated to all members the day after the election. I was devastated that we lost so many good councillors. I would only emphasise one other point. The Liberals can be beaten. We all know what needs to be done. We just need to do it and not simply talk about it.

Other than this, I have been fairly busy at Westminster. I have now taken the late Bob Cryer's place on the Select Committee on

Statutory Instruments - a duty which can easily crush a person under the weight of stultifyingly boring detail. But in amongst all that small print there are real golden nuggets. I wait to see if I can stand it without going totally loopy.

As many of you will know, I have also been spending time with BT and earlier this week spent a fascinating day here in Pendle with the engineers. One moment I was repairing Mrs Smith's phone in Colne (toggled up in the BT overalls), the next I was up a telephone poll. I also spent time at Lomeshaye Estate with engineers laying optical fibre. Really fascinating stuff. I did a 15 minute interview with Radio Lancashire, bent double in a striped red and white tent as the fibre was "being blown into" the new East Lancs Health Consortium building.

Some of you may have seen the extensive piece in the Sunday Mirror last Sunday which had me coming out of the closet on the subject of the Monarchy. I tabled an EDM at the Commons calling for a referendum on whether Britain should retain its monarchy in its present or in a revised form or whether Britain should become a republic. I take the view that this whole issue has never been allowed to surface in public debate. I know that many MPs agree with me but they will not say so publicly because, presumably, they have made the calculation that it will lose them thousands of votes. Perhaps. But perhaps not.

Just before I sat down at the keyboard to type this, I had a call from Peter MacMahon at the Mirror who wrote last week's piece. The article invited readers to phone in with their views. Over 8,000 did (at 10p a call) with 10% arguing for the status quo, 25% for a "modernised monarchy" and over 50% wanting a republic! (Those who phone in are self selecting, but still). Don't ask me about the other 15%. I don't know!

Gordon Prentice MP
Thursday, 26 May 1994

REPORT TO G.C. - 25 MARCH 1994

I feel extremely stressed! My car broke down yet again on the motorway and I was rescued by an AA Patrol that - would you believe it - ran out of petrol. Still, here I am and there is much to report.

Locally, there seems to be a cascade of issues that are now coming up. The M65 has been dominating the local papers and I have made my own position perfectly clear that the County should lift the blight on the protected route for an eastwards extension of the motorway and get cracking on the Colne/Foulridge and Kelbrook/Earby by-passes. I want to see the necessary road improvement built into the County Council's programme and not postponed indefinitely in the hope that the County can persuade the Government to pick up the tab. I am seeking to raise the whole issue of road communications in the House by way of an Adjournment Debate.

Elsewhere, we have seen the saga of Hartley Hospital unfold, although I am still no wiser as to the identity of the people who have purchased it. I have asked the Chairman of the Regional Health Authority to put a stop on the sale until the matters I raised in the Commons are thoroughly investigated. Given the history of the Hospital this issue has, of course, a deep resonance amongst people in Colne and we have been getting a tremendous response to the petitions that are being organised by Tony, Tim and others. Alongside this campaign, we have the other one on the threat to the Crown Post Office in Nelson. As everyone will know, the number of Crown Post Offices has shrunk alarmingly and in Pendle we are now down to this one in Nelson from three as recently as 1988. In Lancashire, over the same period, the number of Crown Post Offices has declined from 23 to 14 and in the UK as a whole from 1499 to 881. The UCW has arranged a public meeting this Sunday at 1pm and I am going to speak, along with people from the Union and others. I invited Valerie Knowles, the person responsible for these matters at the Post Office, but she has told the office that she will not be turning up.

This comes at a time when the Government's review of the Post Office is likely to be published. Heseltine has been examining the possibilities of privatising the Post Office for a good eighteen months now and, in a report published today by the House of Commons Trade & Industry Committee, he is being pressed to say, one way or the other, what he intends to do. Talking of things in today's papers, I see that the Advertising Standards Authority has at last decided to ban the Benetton advertisement featuring the bullet riddled, blood spattered uniform of Marinko Gagro, the Croatia soldier murdered in July of last year. Given the feelings of people in Earby and, indeed, elsewhere, I contacted the ASA as soon as I saw the advertisement on hoardings, calling on them to ban it and requesting sight of the correspondence which had passed between the Authority and Benetton. I also tabled an EDM at the Commons, describing the advertisement as "sick & loathsome". I am relieved that Benetton and the ASA have now recognised that the Ad was offensive and is to be withdrawn.

Another issue which is getting people worked up (and quite rightly) is the threatened closure of Andrew Smith House. I have made my views clear about this to the County and I wait to hear what is to be proposed.

Over the past month I have seen a continuing stream of people about the Child Support Agency and my surgeries continue to produce a caseload spanning the entire range of human experience! I also attended the Borough's Civic Charity Ball which, I have to say, was another experience!

Next month we have the historic elections in South Africa and we will be hearing more about this this evening from our very welcome guest from the ANC. We have our own elections in early May and we must really get stuck in and leave nothing to chance. For myself, I shall be working hard to do everything I possibly can to support candidates in the run up to the elections. Across the country, we may well lose seats but this is not because the Party has, in any sense, fallen back in public support. However, the seats coming up for election this year were the ones we won in 1990 when public agitation against the poll tax was at its highest. There were seats we won in that year that no one reasonably expected us to win. No sooner do we have the local elections out of the way, then we are straight into the Euro elections and we have an excellent candidate in Mark Hendrick, who deserves our full support.

On the political front generally, we are doing very well. While the Government is going on about back to basics, we should be offering the electorate a vision of the future. As I said last month, there is ground here for us to stake out, capture and make our own. We are now in mid-term and have been ahead of the Government in the opinion polls for longer than I can remember. At an equivalent time in the previous electoral cycle (February 1989) we were just pulling ahead in the polls. We need to firm up the support there is for us and translate it into votes.

Finally, on the industrial side, I met some Shop Stewards from Barnoldswick at an important Rolls Royce lobby at Westminster a couple of weeks ago. They raised very real concerns about the company's strategy and its implications for jobs throughout the company. I am pressing (along with other Labour MPs with Rolls Royce plants in their constituencies) for an early meeting with the company and then a follow up with Michael Heseltine.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
25.3.94.

G.C. REPORT - 29 APRIL 1994

I feel a tremendous sense of relief because, at long last, the Deregulation & Contracting Out Bill has finished its Commons stages and I am no longer locked in the Committee Room every Tuesday & Thursday! This Bill is the latest example of Tory lunacy which would allow local authorities to contract out to the private sector such sensitive functions as development control, licensing and even school admissions. Can you believe it! The Minister who led for the Government in Committee, Neil Hamilton MP for Tatton in Cheshire, is a member of the "no turning back" group of right wing Tory MPs and is a classic example of a Tory zealot who wants to privatise everything that isn't nailed down.

Of course, all eyes are now focused on Local & European Elections and the clutch of Parliamentary by elections in Eastley, Rotherham and elsewhere. I have been out and about here in Pendle spending most of my time in target wards and the reception I have been getting has largely been pretty good. However, there is certainly no room for complacency, faced, as we are, with this blizzard of Liberal Focus leaflets. We all know that they fight their elections according to formula, but they do pick up the votes and we need people out on the streets supporting our candidates. As I have said before, having regrets on 6 May is pointless, the time to do the work is now.

HEALTH AT ISSUE

This afternoon I shall be going over to the Burnley General Hospital to meet the Trust Chief Executive, Maggie Aikman to talk about the Fourth Phase Development at the hospital and also to talk about the Trust's move to withdraw recognition from a number of medical unions. On the Hartley Hospital saga, I still do not know the identity of the purchaser, nor the price paid for the building, but I have today heard from the Chairman of the new North West RHA (on 1 April the North Western RHA merged with the Merseyside RHA to form the new North West RHA) Sir Donald Wilson that he is satisfied that all proper procedures were gone through and he will allow the sale to go through to completion. I shall, of course, be doing everything I possibly can to sabotage this, but, in the event that the sale goes through, the ball will then be back in the local authority's court.

Today also saw the launch of the Party's new publication on the state of the Health Service in the North West. It shows that the number of acute hospital beds has dropped by 20% from 1979 and there has been a 136% increase in private beds in private hospitals over the same period. Most startling of all has been the rocketing pay bill for the new breed of NHS managers, up from £9.7 million in 1989/90 to £20.5 million last year - an increase of 209%.

EURO ELECTIONS

As we move past the local elections next week, we shall be straight into the European elections and it is important that we do well here in Lancashire Central. Even although only three of the Westminster constituencies in Lancashire Central are Labour (Pendle, Burnley & Preston) the BBC has, in its wisdom, put this newly formed seat down as notionally Labour. When we win it will flash up on the TV screens as Labour hold. Of course, it is not quite as simple as this and we have to get people out to vote in an election where the turn out is typically low.

CSA

Some of you may have seen the newspaper reports about last Saturday's CSA March and it is clearly that many people are really fired up about the issue. I am pressing for another urgent and fundamental review of the CSA (the one on 7 February was pretty useless) which would address the blatant injustices and iniquities of the present system. However, there is no going back to the old system of court maintenance orders which were capricious in their effect and left many women without anything at all.

Back to campaigning, the office sent out a bundle of material on the Liberals to candidates and I want to start up a regular mailing detailing the failings and horror stories of the Liberals where they are in power. There is enough material there for us to mine profitably.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
29.4.94.

Report to Pendle GC: Sunday 27 Feb 94

Sunday morning. 9.30am so I shall be brief! I've been looking at the minutes of last year's meeting and I can hardly believe a year has passed. Things speed by so rapidly - and yet there are many constants. My constituency casework continues to grow and over the past year I must have dealt with close to 1,000 separate cases. Apart from my regular calendared surgeries, I do housecalls and they seem to be picking up in terms of popularity as word gets around.

As I have said many times before, perception is everything (or almost everything) in politics. This is why the Liberals thrive here. They give the impression they are everywhere, doing things, changing things, speaking up for people. We know that is rubbish but for many people in Pendle that is their perception. In reality, the Liberal Democrats are the scavengers of British politics. Picking up issues here, there and everywhere. Using them if they think they can get a local political advantage. They have no underpinning political philosophy to give coherence to what they do - other than, perhaps, their deep antipathy to the trade unions.

Identifying the Issues

So, how do we take them on and win? We identify the issues and we set the agenda. Quite simply, we beat them to the draw. There are a million local and national issues we can campaign on. The clapped out mains and sewerage systems at Foulridge and Barrowford (Did you know that one sewerage pipe in six is more than 100 years old!!). The closures of our Gas and Electricity showrooms. The threat to the Post Office. Hartley Hospital. The yellow lines in Blacko. The steady loss of manufacturing jobs. We can influence local opinion by taking up issues and campaigning on them.

Over the past year I have been in contact with thousands of people who have signed petitions on the Post Office, rabies(!), VAT on fuel and so on. I shall soon be getting in touch with people over the Hartley Hospital affair. It is about raising the Party's profile and its visibility. In politics, never do good by stealth!

Over the past year I have continued the practice of writing to everyone coming up to age 18 and at 80 or so a month I must have made contact with many, many hundreds of young people over the years. And talking of young people, I am now getting a regular flow of requests from students to help them with their

child support
Agency
anything &
everything.

papers
Counsellor
with issues
newer Social

Long & narrow
other people
but
substantive.

need a
rolling
campaign
over months
and years
takes a long
time to turn
votes together
around

6,000.
in the Office
- Posing - posing
Buddy, Don
Barbichiff
many

~~single currency~~ - 2-95.
 WHAT KIND OF EUROPE
 → Federal Europe
 → Common economic policy
 → asymmetric effect
 → tax and redistribute at Euro level
 managed exchange rates.
 school and college projects. This is good and I like to think I take it seriously.
 Tony Ministers in private confines
 Southfield
 Budget
 Coffee morning

Back to Basics

In Parliament, the Tories are still stuck in their Back to Basics groove - unable to get out. (And, by the way, if I am ever found dead with a plastic bag over my head, I was murdered!!) The slogan - for it is no more than that - is totally counter-productive. The most basic "basic" is telling the truth and they didn't do that in April 1992. Their credibility has been fatally undermined and that will show up in their performance in the local and Euro elections.

concern with
 REAL economy

- 506 deficit
- devalued currency
- 3m unemployed
- VAT on food
- Nat Ins up
- Mortgage Tax relief cut
- Women voting at 65.
- Rover

Local Government

Talking of things local, the local government reorganisation continues to stumble forward and we are waiting for the first orders to be laid in parliament (for the Isle of Wight) giving effect to the Local Government Commission's proposals. On the Parliamentary boundary commission, we shall hear the result in May and I shall be sprouting a few more white hairs as I wait for the result. However, my antenna tells me all will be well in the end. We argued an impressive case and the Tories were totally useless. They did very little in the way of preparation.

all
 votes
 against
 we will
 stop
 review

In the Commons itself, life is a constantly moving tableau. Last week the age of consent, the vote on capital punishment, the Shops Bill and Sunday trading. Next week, overseas aid, manufacturing industry. The Scottish revenue support grants! I am on the Deregulation and Contracting Out Bill and this takes up an immense amount of time.

Henry VIII - absolute power clauses - problem of bees!

premium pay
 - double time
 transferred to
 discipline into
 at job
 interview
 stage. Once
 you get
 job apply
 for
 exemption
 from Sunday
 working.

We are now in mid term and must start thinking and working purposefully towards the next General Election. We need fresh ideas; an interesting and captivating agenda that will enthuse people. We need to embrace the issues that are coming up. How do we ensure that the new technologies do not destroy jobs but create new ones, with new skills? The information super highways will soon be with us. All this and more must be part of Labour's agenda. We cannot always be seen to react - or perceived as reacting. As a Party we must look over the horizon.

official
 recognition
 but looks

Gordon Prentice MP
 Sunday 27 February 1994

clauses I-IV
 Can repeal primary
 legislation by affirmative
 votes - 90 mins debate
 in middle of the night.

REPORT TO PENDLE GC - JANUARY 1994

It has been a very hectic day today. When I arrived at the office I was confronted with the dreadful news that Paul Goodall from Earby was the aid worker who had been shot dead in Bosnia. He leaves a widow, Denise and four young daughters aged two to ten. The whole this is so heart breaking for the family and words can barely describe it. This killing has thrown Bosnia back into the political spotlight and it is my view that Britain, the European Union and the UN are simply not doing enough to bring the conflict to an end.

This war is happening on our doorstep and we have seen genocide and this terrible policy of ethnic cleansing on our TV screens for a couple of years now. Almost a year ago I called for air strikes against the Serbs and Croats if they refused to withdraw to their own borders and cease their attacks on civilian population centres. Indeed, the British Government (when it held the presidency of the European Community) convened a conference in London and set out a whole series of measures which were to have been taken to bring the conflict to an end. Not one of them has been followed through and we had endless vacillation from Douglas Hurd and the Government. The PLP has developed a more robust line in recent months and I shall be continuing to press my colleagues to take a firm line in pressing for military action when required.

YOU CAN'T TRUST THE TORIES

Away from the tragic events of Bosnia, the political world has been in a ferment. The Government's policy on taxation is coming apart at the seams with the speed of an unravelling jersey. The point we are ramming home is that the Tories won the General Election on the back of a lie - the promise to cut taxes. They said the British public couldn't trust Labour and that whole strategy has now boomeranged. I do not think the Government will easily recover from the battering it has taken on tax.

BACK TO BASICS

Superimposed on the Tory tax fiasco, we have had the vaudeville of "back to basics". Apparently this was inspired by Dame Barbara Cartland, although heaven knows what she had in mind. Of all the stuff we have seen on the front pages of the tabloids - the serious as opposed to the frivolous - concern financial shady dealings. The sight of a millionaire Tory MP buying his neighbour's council house as "a long term investment" and Giles Brandreth, Chester MP, getting a £200,000 loan for a exhibition about royal history and then seeing it fold - and the loan written off - speaks volumes.

Running alongside these scandals we have had the Westminster homes for sale scam. Although Pendle Council was not approached, I know that Burnley & Blackburn were offered bounties of £400 a head if they would take homeless Westminster families. The Auditor has described this policy as wilfully unlawful and disgraceful gerrymandering.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REVIEW

Still on local government. The big issue of the moment is the report of the Local Government Commission on our neighbours next door in North Yorkshire. Their report is totally useless and I am sure will commend very little local support, but it remains to be seen how David Curry - Local Government Minister - responds. It was he, you will remember, who publicly advocated a link-up between Craven and Ribbles Valley, last November. It seems to me that the Local Government Review may yet run into the sand, such is the strength of antipathy felt by Tory MPs who are seeing their beloved Shires disappear in a puff of smoke.

I joined Lancashire County Council in a deputation to see David Curry about their budget earlier this month and I also joined Susan, Jim and others from Pendle Council to see Tony Baldry. He was polite enough - as they usually are - but gave us nothing or next to nothing.

OUT AND ABOUT

Other than that, I envisage a busy time as local elections draw nearer. I was at Pendle Heritage Centre today and on Sunday, I shall be meeting the Barrowford people who were flooded out and then I shall be doing another meeting on Kashmir with Mike Hindley - who, after June, will no longer be our MEP, as Pendle will now be going into the new Lancashire Central Euro Constituency.

Next week I shall be going to the Low Pay Conference in Accrington, followed by a visit to the new Post Office Sorting Office in Preston. I should also say that my good friend Jimmy Boyce MP for Rotherham tragically died last week and there will be an important by-election coming up there.

GORDON PRENTICE MP

28.1.94.

REPORT TO PENDLE GC - NOVEMBER 1993

It has been another incredibly busy month. And to cap it all, a few days ago we had the devastating news from Cleveland Guest. As soon as I heard the news I was on the phone to Bob and Mike Cooney of the AEEU. I shall be doing everything I can over coming weeks to help save this company. Although I know from my discussions with Bob Parsons of the MSF, over recent months, the problems the company has faced. The Union raised questions with me about the pension fund and this is something I am looking into.

We have also had the dreadful murder trial of the two boys who killed Jamie Bulger and this has traumatized the nation. There is the other sickening case at trial at present involving the torture and killing of sixteen year old Suzanne Capper. Crime is now increasing at an alarming rate and we need a debate on the left about how the - sometimes difficult - issues should be addressed. (In Colne, I am getting lots of people at my surgeries complaining about multiple burglaries and perhaps there is a case for calling a public meeting on this.) Law and Order shouldn't be a "no go area" for discussion within the Party, and we should start addressing the very real concerns that people feel. Perhaps what we are witnessing is the result of a further breakdown of "community". Society is more atomized now than ever before - people watch videos in their own homes rather than going to the cinema.

Parliamentary Boundary Commission Inquiry

As I dictate this my mind drifts to next Monday when the Parliamentary Boundary Commission Review starts at Preston. I expect it to run for about four days. This really is crunch time and unless we keep the 3000 Tory voters from Read Sabden & Simonstone out of Pendle it will be immensely more difficult for Labour to hold the Seat at the next Election.

Also next week we have the second reading of the Sunday Trading Bill and on Tuesday we have the first Unified Budget.

The Party is now committed to full employment and we need to start fleshing out what this actually means in practice. As everyone knows there are just under 3,000,000 unemployed at present, but if measured on the same basis as used in 1979, registered unemployment would now stand at over 4,000,000. The figures have been "refined" over 30 times and in every case except one the statistics have been "refined" downwards. Unemployment costs £9,000 per person in benefit and lost taxes and is hardly "a price worth paying". If we address unemployment seriously this would do more than anything else to close the budget deficit.

I mentioned in my report to all members the Lobby on Manufacturing at the Commons on Wednesday and I have to say that the Unions have produced a superb report packed full of very useful statistics.

Local government reorganisation

Elsewhere, we have the continuing controversy over local government reorganisation and the incredible spectacle in the Commons earlier this week of reorganisation in Scotland being steamrollered through by Government fiat (and no independent local government

commission). In Wales reorganisation has been delayed for a year, yet we were only told about this in the last minute of a six and a half hour debate on Monday. As far as the English review is concerned, Susan will no doubt be reporting on latest developments in the Lancashire ADC.

We will soon be getting details of the proposed grant settlement for local authorities and the Government's assessment of our SSAs will be absolutely crucial in determining how much money our local council and indeed, Lancashire, gets. These SSAs (or Standard Spending Assessments) represent what the Government thinks councils should be allowed to spend to provide a standard, or common, level of services across the country. On this issue - as with so many others - the detail is immensely important and I know that Pendle Council is putting a lot of work into this.

Talking about money. The most grotesque news of the week must be the £42,000,000 payout to Peter Wood, the Direct Line Insurance chief. In Parliament yesterday, Tony Newton, the Leader of the House, couldn't bring himself to criticise this King's ransom, yet over the next week or two the Government will be explaining to the nation why Invalidity Benefit, and possibly Unemployment Benefit have to be curtailed. It is rumoured in the FT today that the Social Security Secretary is going to announce the week after next, the raising of the pension age for women from 60 to 65. With all this happening, it is manifestly unfair that the Government should stick to an upper tax rate of 40p in the £. Besides his £42m payout Peter Wood will be receiving an index linked annual salary £350,000.

Back to Pendle

Still no news on the M65 although things seem to be stirring. (There was an interesting report on the motorway widening programme published this week - copies available from the office). Still on transport matters we had the interesting revelations about the BR Pension Fund being plundered to pay for the refurbishment and upgrading of the royal train at a cost of £750,000-. We wait to see how this unfolds.

Millions of other things happening. But let me just mention one or two. I am trying to get a debate in the Commons on nursery provision, which has got me completely fired up. I am fed up with Lancashire County Council - and indeed Pendle Council - getting brickbats on this, when the real culprits are Central Government. The local Lib/Dems have mercilessly exploited this issue and I think we need to make an energetic response. (The Party has published a consultative green paper on education: "Opening Doors to a learning society" and the CLP may wish to have a look at this. The closing date for comments is March.)

As far as my surgeries are concerned I am getting the usual kaleidoscope of problems and issues. We are still getting a lot of local people who are being badly burnt by the Child Support Agency and I am doing my best to help. The problem lies in the legislation itself - the Child Support Act - which allows the CSA to take no account of all the outgoings of an absent parent. Another example of the Tories "back to basics" gone terribly wrong.

GORDON PRENTICE MP
26.11.93.